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SCIENCE FICTION
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IS DOOMED !**



ROBERT A. HEINLEIN - FRANK BELKNAP LONG - ALAN BARCLAY

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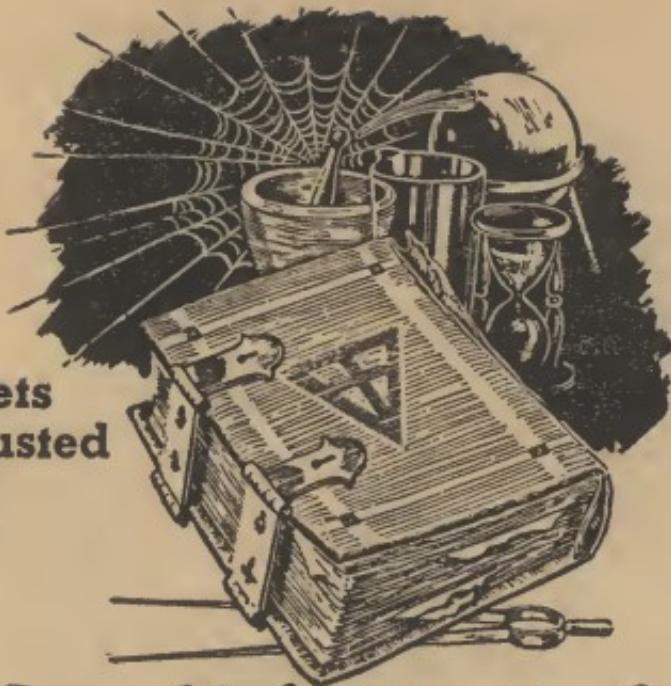
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THE GOLDEN CALF

On Earth cleanliness may be next to godliness, but in the world of Kulls, the nearest to divinity was bovinity.



GIUNTA 57

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

IT TAKES about four hours to get to the interior of the Kull planetoid. Four hours of heavy plodding through jungle detours and switchbacks, sandy wastes and open grazing lands where swarms of

stinging insects hover like Greclan furies.

Grayson was traveling light and he relieved the tension by pretending that the planetoid was a tropical island on Earth, bright with fragrant, many-

petaled blooms and golden-crested lories. From time to time he paused to stare back at the starship, a bright triangle of radiance against the blood-red sky.

The little man at Grayson's side carried no personal equipment. But he was bent almost double beneath a heavy pack of emergency medical supplies, and he frowned in disapproval every time his companion swung about on the thin-cropped grass.

"We've got to keep moving," the little man warned. "There's no twilight here. Night descends like a swooping vulture. One minute you're in bright sunlight and the next—"

"You're in total darkness. Sure, Kennedy, I know. You can't see your hand before your face. Strike a match and you're a walking target. The flare doesn't even have to last more than a fraction of a second. The darters come right at you."

"I'm glad you realize that," Kennedy said. "They go for your eyes, but it's the flame that attracts them. I guess all insects are attracted by light—on every planet of every sun. Even blind worms on Terra."

He tightened the clasp on

his pack, curling his hand around the cold metal.

"We're blind worms ourselves, in a way."

"A man is a worm only when he wants to be," Grayson said, irritably. "And I wish you'd keep your entomology straight. A worm isn't an insect."

"If he's a human worm he might as well be," Kennedy retorted. "Haven't you ever felt completely insect-like in the presence of the unknown?"

"No. Have you?"

"Of course. And it's a good way to feel—a safe way to feel. No one would deliberately turn aside to trample on a worm. Oh, a child might, or a peculiarly vicious sadist. But in the main the rule holds good."

"What are you trying to say?"

Kennedy looked up at the weathered sandstone cliffs and the long line of gigantic conifer ferns which ran parallel with the grazing lands for several miles in an easterly direction. In all his years as captain of a colonist-transporting ship, he had never before encountered such a landscape.

It was a kaleidoscope of contrasting colors, with vegetation that soared to the zen-

ith, and then became stunted and niggardly. The valleys were too deep, the cliffs too precipitous, and the grazing lands seemed always to terminate in arid depressions. They were the color of flame by day, but at night their barely perceptible contours became overpowering and dreadful.

Kennedy shut his eyes. The Kull planetoid vanished and in his mind's gaze he was back on the starship. He was two parsecs out and homeward bound, with another hazardous settlement project safely concluded. Then had come the bitter, tragic blow—an S O S from the colony he had helped to establish.

Every line of that incredible message danced fitfully before Kennedy's inward vision.

Come back immediately. Landslide. Two-thirds of colony obliterated. Tragedy inexplicable. We camped beneath mountain on advice of robot calculators. Perfectly safe terrain. Data fed to calculators checked and double-checked. Kulls approached camp but kept right on grazing, apparently unconcerned by tragedy. Condition of survivors critical. Rush medical aid.

“YOU HAVEN'T answered my question,” Grayson said. “Just why did you ask me if I ever felt insect-like in the presence of the unknown? Were you thinking about the Kulls? There's very little we don't know about them. We've had plenty of opportunity to observe them.”

“I wasn't thinking about the Kulls,” Kennedy said.

He gestured toward a distant hillside where a saddle-backed area of denuded top-soil shimmered in the fine bright sunlight. Across the slope, eight Kulls were lazily grazing, their long necks extended as they munched on succulent herbs.

“There are forebodings you can't analyze, can't pin down,” Kennedy went on. “A hundred men and women die and the Kulls go right on grazing. We know that they're highly intelligent animals, in many respects superior to the great apes. But you can't make me believe that grazing quadrupeds with the intelligence of two-year-old human infants had anything to do with that landslide.”

His arm swept the valley in a wide arc. “The whole planetoid has been over-grazed. You can see how short the

grass is everywhere. The Kulls are intelligent cattle—nothing more. The only thing that vitally concerns them is their food supply. Someday it will give out. But until it does, human colonization isn't likely to antagonize them. Men are not grass-eaters."

"We'd eat grass if we were starving."

"How would you expect the Kulls to know that? It's curious, but when we first arrived I wasn't in the least concerned about them. I took their friendliness for granted. I still do. But after my fifth or sixth day here, I began to grow uneasy. There's something on the planetoid that *is* antagonistic. Not the Kulls, mind you. It's a tension-generating something that developed slowly and insidiously after we set up camp. Just before we left I was having nightmares—really bad ones.

"A voice seemed to be warning me: 'You should never have come. You're in deadly danger. The entire colony is in danger.' If I had been in the least superstitious..."

A soft rustling announced the arrival of a fresh wind. It blew through the thin-cropped grass, agitating each blade separately, making each blade

seem razor-sharp and menacing. A million tiny knives underfoot, hacking away at human soles, warning away trespassers.

"Perhaps the calculating robots were in error," Grayson said, ignoring the rustling. "Perhaps that camping site wasn't safe."

"Nonsense!" Kennedy retorted. "Calculating robots are *machines*. You feed them data on a tape and they analyze, judge and report. Their reasoning processes meet all the demands of logical thought. They can no more go off on a sidetrack—"

A shout interrupted them. Kennedy looked up and saw Jimmy Preston, a lad from the camp, coming toward them.

He was quite a young lad, and he bore himself with an air of maturity unusual in a boy of fourteen. He was running now, and he might have been just a boy racing along a stretch of open countryside on Earth, had it not been for his unnatural pallor and the terror that shone in his eyes. Above his head, through lacy clouds, a vengeance of blueness seemed to hover.

He was breathing harshly when he came to a full stop before the two men.

"It's pretty awful, sir," he wheezed, addressing himself directly to Kennedy. "You don't know how glad I am that you came back. They'll all be glad, even though some of them may not want to let on that they gave up all hope when the robots disappeared."

"The robots *disappeared*?"

Kennedy gripped the boy's arm, so tightly that he cried out in pain. Instantly Kennedy said: "I'm sorry, Jimmy, I didn't mean to hurt you. You're just about the bravest kid I've ever known. But what you said about the robots took me by surprise. Exactly how bad is it?"

"It couldn't be worse, sir. Right after the landslide dust cleared we practically gave up all hope. Of staying, I mean. We knew you'd come back fast the instant you got our message. If it hadn't been for that—"

"Well, we're on our way, as you can see. We can't travel quite as fast as you can, so you'd better run on ahead and tell them we're coming. We've got medical supplies here—everything they'll need."

"All right, sir. I'll do that."

The lad turned and left them, and they resumed their journey in silence.

THEY HAD advanced scarcely half a mile when a shot rang out in the stillness, and Kennedy's pack was lifted from his back. It all happened with such appalling suddenness that Kennedy stood amazed, following the direction of his companion's gaze with a nightmarish sense of unreality.

Something bright and metallic glittered for an instant behind a nearby conifer fern. Then it vanished from sight.

"Keep down!" Grayson warned, a desperate urgency in his voice. "It's one of the robots from the camp. *It's trying to kill us!*"

Kennedy laughed harshly. "Look over there—behind that hillock! There are at least six of them!"

Grayson stared around him. There were unmistakable movements now behind each of the nearer hillocks—a dodging and a weaving about, the glint of sunlight on metal.

Grayson was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "We're unarmed and completely at their mercy."

"I know."

"There's nothing we can do. They'll fire again, and we can't stop them."

"We'll have to wait for them."

to come to us," Kennedy said. "If we don't move they may not attack us. That shot may have been intended as a warning."

"It's tempting fate," Grayson said, his lips white. "Every instant we stand here in plain view—"

"We've no choice. We'd be dead by now if they wanted to kill us. We'll just have to wait and see what happens."

For five full minutes neither Grayson nor Kennedy moved. The air seemed to sparkle and grow brighter and needles of light danced above the nearer hillocks. Then, from behind the thin-grazed slopes and the conifer ferns, eight robots came into view and converged upon them, walking with their shoulders held straight and their segmented arms clasping compact little energy weapons triggered for instant action.

The robots came up and surrounded the two men. One of them came very close to Kennedy and prodded him in the stomach with the stock of its gun.

"Walk, man," the robot commanded. The creature's conical head and massive body-box vibrated slightly as it waited for Kennedy to obey.

Kennedy started to walk.

Grayson stared in dismay. "Challenge them!" he pleaded. "Start asking them questions. If you don't, I will. We've got to find out why they're behaving like this. There must be an answer."

"But what you're suggesting is ridiculous! They'd never obey orders hostile to us! Every command fed to them on a tape must be checked by data in their relays before they'll act on it. You know that as well as I do. An order to injure a man would be rejected instantly as suspect and unsound."

Grayson was walking directly behind Kennedy now, with robots on both sides of him. His mouth twitched and there was a look of desperate pleading in his eyes. "If we don't act now we may never get another chance. We've got to take the bull by the horns—"

"Not now!" Kennedy warned, looking back over his shoulder. "It would just be an unpleasant way of committing suicide."

"But we've got to find out where they're taking us. My God! A thing like this is not to be endured."

"You'd better do as they say

if you want to go on living," Kennedy advised.

One of the robots prodded Grayson between the ribs. "Walk, man," it commanded.

Grayson tightened his lips and stumbled along in Kennedy's wake, his face ashen. "This is unbelievable," he muttered. "It can't be happening to us."

THE CAVE was wide and deep and dripping with moisture; a natural rock structure which penetrated a moss-gray slope like a wedge of steel. The high-arching entrance was choked with foliage which absorbed and filtered the sunlight into grotesque patterns of light and shadow. The wind kept up a continuous drumming, setting twigs to dancing like eerie ghosts through depths beyond depths of spectral radiance.

There was a momentary halt while three of the robots went ahead and cleared away the obstructing vegetation. Then, with the metal creatures on both sides of them and guns at their ribs, the two men stumbled into the cave's brightly glowing interior. For a moment they remained motionless, blinking in the unexpected light, aware only of shiver-

ing movements about them and the pounding of the blood at their temples.

Then Kennedy cried out, "Good Lord! Just look at that!"

In incredulous amazement, the two men stared about them. On both sides of the cave, gigantic murals towered. The scenes depicted were infinitely larger than life, with edges so sharply defined that they seemed stippled into the granite-gray surface of the rock itself. The pigments were crimson, gold, emerald, and purple, and they flashed with a luminosity so intense that no part of the cave remained in darkness.

There were mountains and rivers and low-hanging cloud banks. There were ferns that towered to the zenith and in the near distance thousands of grazing Kulls, their long necks outstretched in the light of a coppery sun.

The Kulls were alone on the slopes. But in the far distance the sloping grazing lands became highways of stone and aerial runways bright with moving vehicles. In the far distance were towering machines, stark symmetries of metal and crystal so vertiginous in their brightness that

the mind lost all sense of direction in attempting to view them as units, or to bring them into sharp visual perspective. For miles the great turbines and sun-mirroring heliographs seemed to blaze and blend, becoming symbols of a scientific triumph unique in space and time: the perfected mechanical dream of a race of creators and builders who had dared greatly under the stars.

Grayson had forgotten where he was. With an effort he forced himself to remember. But still he remained calm, his fear held in abeyance by a soaring exaltation and awe.

"Only the greatest art could have achieved such an illusion of reality in depth," he exclaimed. "The Kull must have had..."

He paused, staring at his companion with a wild surmise.

"Say it," Kennedy urged.

"A great civilization at one time. Don't you agree?"

"Naturally."

"But how could grazing quadrupeds with the intelligence of two-year-old human infants—"

"You've asked me that question a dozen times. There's only one answer that makes sense. Their civilization must

have waned and died. If the Kulls underwent degenerative changes—"

"Man, sit!" one of the robots ordered.

Grayson and Kennedy sat down on the smooth floor of the cave. The robots stood for a moment in a circle looking down at them.

"Food will be brought to you," one of them said.

"You will be brought fresh fruit. You will eat and rest. You must not worry."

"Not worry!" Grayson groaned. "Oh, God!"

Without another word the robots turned, and disappeared into the shadows at the far end of the cave.

GRAYSON rubbed his jaw with the back of his hand. "I'll be damned," he said.

"All we can do is wait," Kennedy said. "I'm sure they will keep their promise."

Grayson suddenly sat bolt upright, his jaw muscles tightening. "Listen. I've got an idea. If we could catch one of those calculating robots alone, with his guard down, we could find out what's wrong with him."

Kennedy nodded slightly, but said nothing.

"They're coming back with some food," Grayson said.

"Perhaps only one of them will come back. If we can take him by surprise—"

Kennedy smiled, and his eyes lighted up. "For some time now I've been way ahead of you," he said. "I suggest we work it this way. I'll stay right where I am. You get up and stand a short distance behind me. Flatten yourself against the wall. If the robot comes in alone he'll see me first and start wondering where you are. Then you can jump him."

Waiting was nerve-wracking. It was unbearably hot inside the cave and both men were drenched with perspiration. Grayson's mouth felt parched his eyelids ached and the gray rock surface at his back abraded his flesh as he leaned heavily against it.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded at far end of the cave and a robot emerged from the shadows. It came clumping slowly toward them, carrying an incredibly bright assortment of fruits in a wooden bowl.

"Watch yourself now!" Kennedy whispered.

The robot stood for a moment looking at Kennedy. "Where other man?" it asked. Kennedy managed to look puzzled. He shook his head and screwed up his eyes in mock

bewilderment. With short, uncertain steps the metal figure moved past the seated man into the shadows.

"Now!" Kennedy called out.

Grayson leaped straight toward the robot. With the dexterity of an accomplished gymnast, he landed on his toes directly in front of it, gripped it by the shoulders and swung it about, his hand darting toward the immobilizing connection at the summit of its body-box.

Instantly a metal arm raked his flesh. It tore a deep gash in his shoulder and sent him staggering backwards.

"Man fool!" the robot said.

It came at Grayson with both of its long arms in flailing motion.

Kennedy's heart shuddered. "Be careful!" he warned, leaping up. "It could cut you in two!"

As the shout reverberated through the cave, the robot swung about. Kennedy was ready for it. He advanced upon it in a weaving crouch, his head lowered.

He waited until the robot was almost upon him. Then he sidestepped abruptly and ducked under the flailing arms with a grim and sardonic purposefulness. The robot brought

its arms sharply downward in a vicious, chopping motion. But Kennedy anticipated the move; he swung his boot at a metal ankle and the robot went sprawling.

Instantly Kennedy hurled himself on top of it. He got his fingers securely around the immobilizing connection and clicked it off.

He sat on the ground for a moment, rubbing his jaw, looking up at Grayson.

"Thanks!" Grayson said.

"Pick him up!" Kennedy said. "Set him against the wall and start working on him. *He's all yours.*"

AT FIRST the dismantling of the robot was routine. But after a moment both men were caught up in the utter strangeness and wonder of it.

It wasn't an ordinary, man-made calculating robot any longer. Complex and mystifying changes had been made in the relays, the memory banks and in nearly all of the basal circuits.

From a storage slot, Grayson selected eight metal tapes covered with fed-in data and tested them one by one. It was like a job at the camp, a routine checkup on a model that

had developed a mechanical impediment.

He passed each tape through a vocal recorder without animating the corresponding motor circuit. The robot thus remained completely motionless voice answered questions deep and inert while a faint, tinny within its body-box.

The questions had been phrased with intelligence and precision. But the answers followed no rational pattern.

Before the landslide someone at the camp had asked: "In view of all the data at your disposal, would you say that the Kulls are emotionally capable of understanding us? In more general terms, can a grazing quadruped understand the instinctive drives of a big-brained biped on any level—human or otherwise?"

The first answer defied analysis. "Sweet is the grazing and beautiful the greenness of the land. But when the grazing is no longer sweet there may still be understanding in the mind. Yes...there may be understanding."

The original answer had never been delivered. It had been punched out and discarded automatically by the robot and a less bewildering answer had been substituted for it.

The robot had simply replied, "Yes."

"The actual reply was straightforward enough," Kennedy said, "but its thought processes before that were baffling. Precisely what did it mean by 'understanding in the brain?'"

Grayson passed another tape through the recorder. "Are there any poisonous fruits on the planetoid?" another colonist had asked. "Or any poisonous herbs?"

"Many, many," the tinny voice replied. "They are not deadly to the Kulls but a man would perish quickly and in great agony—"

Almost instantly the answer had been discarded and another reply substituted. There was a sudden break in the tinny voice and the words came slowly and confusedly: "To the Kulls there is no danger from anything that grows. They have built up a natural immunity. But to a man there would be...some danger. Yes, there would be some slight danger without understanding."

The third question-and-answer tape was even more confusing. Not only was the final answer incomplete, but it failed to convey the subtle, disturbingly inadequate warning im-

plicit in the earlier answers. It seemed without conscience or remorse, to be nudging the questioner toward and abyss.

"It is safe to assume so," was the trend of the fourth, fifth and sixth answers. Safe to assume that all of the water on the planetoid was pure and uncontaminated, all of the vegetation palatable, all of the rock structures so solid that a cave-in or landslide was unthinkable. *Safe, safe, safe.* No deadly insects, poisonous snakes, quicksands or far-ranging forest fires to threaten men with extinction.

No danger for men anywhere at all....

"YOU HAVE discovered the difference between a creature and a creator," a calm voice said. "You built those robots. When they thought in human terms their only concern was for your safety. But when we altered their circuits they began to think in our terms, and to serve our interests. Only at first was there bewilderment, confusion. The thought patterns you instilled in them left faint, ghostly echoes. For a few days, as you measure time, a struggle went on in their mechanical minds. They served

two masters. Then all of the human echoes died."

In some strange way the voice seemed to cut through Kennedy's skull and into his brain. It may have been ultrasonic. Or it may have been a telepathic voice. He only knew that it *was* a voice—a very strange and terrible voice speaking directly to him.

"Creatures cannot reason with any degree of independence," the voice went on. "We changed their circuits to give them Kull attributes. They began to think like Kulls, to act like Kulls. But still they could not reason imaginatively, as we can reason. The robots asked themselves: 'What will best serve the Kulls?' The answer came, quick, and instinctive: 'The destruction of man. If man truly hungers he will destroy everything that walks and crawls and flies. He will even destroy the Kulls.'"

Kennedy was on his feet, wild-eyed and staring. Grayson looked at the tapes in his hand and quickly tossed them aside. He rose slowly to stand beside Kennedy, his face drained of all color.

"The robots had to reason that way," the voice went on. "One compulsive rule of thumb guided their functioning—what

was best for the Kulls. We had changed them and made them ours. Being our creatures, they had to serve us blindly. But creature wisdom can be shortsighted and vain."

Kennedy raised his head and spoke directly to the voice. "Then the landslide that wiped out two-thirds of the colony was brought about by a deliberate lie?"

"It was not a lie to the robots," the voice said. "It was a logical, consistent reply. The colonists asked: 'Is the mountain safe?' The robot replied: 'It is safe,' meaning, 'If there is a landslide and the colony is destroyed so much the better. But with or without a landslide the mountain is safe for the Kulls. Only the colony will perish.'"

Kennedy did not move. He steadied his eyes on the mural, as if he half-expected to see the owner of the voice materialize on one of the distant slopes.

"Do not look for me there," the voice said.

"But you *are* a Kull?"

"Yes," the voice said.

"And you have a great, complex civilization which you have concealed from us. In some miraculous way you have concealed it."

"We had cities once," the Kull voice said. "We had a technology which surpassed anything your little race has known. It was a great vanity, a foolishness. A few small, amusing trifles remain. This cave, for instance, is so saturated with electronic impulses that ultrasound waves are generated every time you whisper or scratch your nose. But such trifles are no more than sentimental toys to us—objects treasured in childhood which have long since been outgrown."

The voice paused, then went on: "You see us now at the height of our evolutionary ascent. What we once accomplished through the instruments of technical science we can now accomplish through pure thought."

"Yet you graze on the slopes like cattle. You pretend to be docile and dull, with minds that—"

"Wait! Did I say that *all* Kulls were alike. On Earth you have men and women who live in rude huts in a virgin wilderness, as naked as the day they were born. There are others who ride the wild stallions at the core of exploding suns. *We* are the great, evolved Kulls. But all Kulls are broth-

ers and will someday share the same great, eternal dream."

"And the robots?"

"They served only the Kulls who graze on the slopes. We changed their circuits to enable them to aid the slope-grazing Kulls. If Kulls are to evolve they must act with independence on each and every evolutionary level, from grass-grazer to contemplator of eternity. You were men and the grass-grazers were our brothers. We naturally sided with our brothers. But blindly, stupidly, the robots went too far. They reasoned that the men who were their former masters would destroy *all* Kulls.

"They failed to realize that only the grass-grazers would be endangered by human colonization, and that we, the evolved Kulls, could intervene at any time to protect our brothers."

A note of tragic sadness crept into the voice. "Even the wisest of men make mistakes. And Kulls are no wiser than men in that respect. The disaster to the colony was unjustified—a grievous blunder we should have foreseen and guarded against. It may have served as an evolutionary object lesson to the grass-grazers... even as a challenge to their

initiative. But the taking of intelligent life can never be justified in time or space."

DISBELIEF widened Kennedy's eyes as the voice paused for the third time. When it spoke again, it seemed almost to be pleading for forbearance and understanding, the bright dissolving of unnecessary barriers, the bridging of unfathomable gulfs.

"You must believe me when I say that we bear you no ill-will."

"Then why did you have the robots bring us here?" Kennedy demanded. "Why?"

To convince you that you must leave the Kull planetoid forever. A third of the colony has survived, and you—you are a born leader of men. You can persuade them all to go."

"And if I refuse."

"You will not refuse."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I am about to show myself to you," the voice said.

They heard the music then. It was a song of solitude and meditation, of ever-growing knowledge and power. It was a song of space and distant voyages, of a strange golden idol once worshipped by men long ago on Earth.

Slowly the mural's radiance

increased in brightness and the landscape faded from view. Where the grazing lands had stretched to far horizons, a pinpoint of brilliance danced. The pinpoint expanded and became a glowing oval hanging suspended in mid-air. From the depths of the glow two great horns emerged.

Kennedy's mouth was dry. He waited, half terrified, half eager, as the Kull took shape before him, sitting upright and enthroned.

The Kull sat erect and the brightness about it increased and became suddenly intolerable.

Grayson cried out: "No! No! No!" and covered his eyes.

But Kennedy looked straight at the Kull and a strange wild cry came from his lips.

"Holy Cow!"

Then both men turned and fled from the cave, and Kennedy knew that he would do what the Kull asked. High above in the night sky, a thousand twinkling points of light blazed down in weaving patterns of splendor, inviting man to rejoice in his small but exciting destiny under the stars.

CALIFORNIA WILL FALL INTO THE SEA

by WILLIAM F. DRUMMOND, Ph. D.

*Is America destined to be the scene of a second
Atlantis?*



AS ANYBODY who has studied geology knows—certainly those who have mapped out the future movements of the North American continent—a few thousand years more will see that section of the Pacific Coast west of the Rockies vanish from the map. It is taken for granted that

California will join those other more ancient parts of the world's surface which have been swallowed up by the sea. This has always been regarded as inevitable, though for a long time no one saw any reason to suppose that this change would be in our time. But now there have been developments in the

very recent past and in the present that indicate a drastic change—for the worst.

It is now not only possible, but quite probable, that the sinking of California into the sea has been immensely advanced, that the first signs of it are beginning today, and that it may culminate in full disaster not thousands of years from now, but in the immediate future, next year, this year, even tomorrow. There are good sound reasons for this belief.

The recent series of earthquakes which have disturbed the rock base which underlies the state of California have aroused very little concern anywhere in the world—not even in California. The residents of the western coastal area of the United States have become so used to the frequent tremors that rattle the dishes in their cupboards and make hairline cracks in the stucco walls of their buildings that even a real, heaving roll of the supposedly solid earth beneath them gets only slight notice.

Californians have gotten their sealegs on dry land, and, unless there is vast destruction and great loss of life, an earthquake in that part of the country deserves no more than passing mention. The ears of the

natives have long since become deaf to the constantly recurring cry of "Wolf!"

Historically speaking, this mental attitude is not in the least unusual. A little less than nineteen hundred years ago, in the popular Roman resort town of Pompeii, the local citizens felt the same way. There were occasional tremors and shakings of the earth, but what of that? Nothing really serious had ever come of the rumbling threats. Pompeii had stood on the fertile slopes of Mount Vesuvius for more than four hundred years; there was no reason to suppose that it would not stand for four hundred more.

Pompeii, Herculium, and other nearby towns had plenty of warning. In A.D. 63, after a series of minor seismic vibrations, a major earthquake struck, destroying most of the public buildings, and so badly damaging the remaining structures that they had to be rebuilt. And rebuild they did. Ignoring the warning, the people of Pompeii were still working on the reconstruction of the town when, sixteen years later, in A.D. 79, Mount Vesuvius shook and exploded, burying Pompeii and Herculium under tons of volcanic

ash and asphyxiating the citizens with noxious, suffocating volcanic fumes.

Pompeii was dead and entombed; its very existence was forgotten and remained so for seventeen centuries. By that time, Italian towns had again been built on the sides of the still potentially destructive volcano.

DOES A SIMILAR situation exist in California? There are sound geological reasons for believing that such destruction could occur there—on an even vaster scale!

In order to understand how this potential danger could exist, we must first understand something of the construction of our planet. Let us imagine what the Earth would look like if we were to remove the oceans—completely drain them and dry them, so that the entire surface of our planet would be dry land. What would Earth look like?

We would find that most of the surface—the former ocean beds—is much lower than the relatively small areas of the continents. The continents themselves would seem to be high, mountainous plateaus. Standing on the ocean floor, we would be able to look up

at the high, clifflike escarpments that would cut us off from the tablelands above. Only in a few places would it be possible to walk from the sea bottom to the top of the continent; in most places we would be faced with a steep slope that could only be climbed with difficulty. The height of these precipices would vary from half a mile to nearly ten miles!

The west coast of the United States, from Baja California to Alaska, forms the edge of one of these steep precipices. Due to the slope of the land, the actual edge is below the surface of the Pacific; a few miles out from the shoreline, the bottom drops off abruptly, from a depth of about seven hundred feet to a depth of nearly two miles!

It should be obvious that the edge of such a gigantic palisades would be subject to cracking and crumbling, especially as the sea itself is constantly eroding the underlying support. Such cracking does occur in California, and it is the basic cause of the 'quakes.

But what has this to do with any comparison between a volcano in Italy and earthquakes in California? Many people express surprise on

learning that there is any relationship between the two. Once, when I was giving an address to a small group of students in an Eastern college, one young woman said, "But, Dr. Drummond! There aren't any volcanoes in California!"

She was misinformed, of course; there are a great many volcanoes along the West Coast. Vulcanism and earthquake phenomena are very closely linked. Let us see why.

Beneath the solid surface of the earth, the interior of the planet is very hot. At a depth of only a few miles, the internal temperature is great enough to melt most rocks and metals. It is doubtful that the *magma*, as this hot mixture of minerals is called, is actually in a liquid state. The tremendous pressure to which it is subjected probably keeps it in a semi-rigid state. But if the pressure is removed from above, the magma is squeezed out by the pressure from below, and it reaches the surface in a hot, liquid form. This is exactly what happens during a volcanic eruption.

And it is for this reason that the volcanic regions of the Earth are located along "fault lines", or cracks in the crust;

it is here that the pressure of the depths is released and the magma breaks forth to the surface in the form of lava.

IN CALIFORNIA, we find two places where major fault lines occur. The largest of these is some two hundred miles inland—the Sierra Nevada Range. It is nothing more nor less than a single great fault, formed when the edge of the continental shelf tilted toward the sea. A cross section of the area, taken in an east-west direction, would show that the eastern side of the Sierra Nevadas is steep and clifflike, while the western side slopes gently toward the Pacific.

As the slope approaches the shoreline, another series of faults appears, showing further cracking of the continental shelf. These are known as the Coastal Ranges, a series of mountain chains cut through with many fault lines, places where the basic granite supporting structure of the continent has become cracked and broken.

It is along these faults that the volcanoes appear. In the latter half of the last century, there was an enormous eruption at Tres Virgenes, in

Southern California. Lassen's Peak became active only a few years ago. Farther north, we find such active craters as those of Mount Hood and Mount Ranier. A century ago, Mount St. Helena and Mount Baker erupted, pouring forth lava flows and volcanic ash. These are only a few of the active peaks in the Coastal Ranges, and the list does not include the many "inactive" volcanoes that may be found the full length of the Pacific Coast, from Alaska to Baja California.

Many people assume that, just because a volcano is inactive at a given time, it is "dead"; they assume that, like the dinosaurs, it has passed away, never to return. It is worth remembering that, until its disastrous activity during the first century of the Christian Era, Mount Vesuvius had been considered a "dead" volcano throughout all of recorded human history!

Not all major fault lines recourse. Those near the edge of the continental shelf tend to be merely cracks in the cooler upper crust, but even so they are a potential threat. The most active of the faults along the California coast is the one known as the San Andreas

Rift. The northern end of this great fissure is south of Eureka, California, near Cape Mendocino. From there, it runs offshore for a distance of some seventy-five miles to a spot a few miles north of Cape Arena. Thence, southward, the rift remains on the landward side of the shore, running through the San Francisco peninsula and curving off to the southeast toward the deserts of Southern California. The total length of the cleavage is nearly six hundred miles.

The San Andreas Rift itself is difficult to see from the ground, although it is readily visible from the air. It is not an open fissure; it is comparable to the type of crack one gets in a sheet of window glass when the edge is tapped just a trifle too hard. The split will begin at the edge, run partway across the glass, and stop. The fissure is there, but it hasn't opened—yet.

Here, then, is the geological position of the California coast. The edge of the great escarpment is crumbling and cracking, causing the quakes and tremors that shake the seaboard. Occasionally, a major movement of the crust will destroy millions of dollars worth of property and level

whole cities. In 1812, a great 'quake struck in the south, causing widespread destruction throughout Southern California. In 1872 the whole Sierra Nevada fault shifted in a massive subterranean upheaval, causing seismic disturbances as far inland as the middle of Nevada.

San Francisco got its first taste of the Earth's internal violence in 1868, and this was followed by the Great San Francisco 'Quake of 1906. Both were direct results of changes in the San Andreas Rift.

In 1925, Santa Barbara was subjected to a severe shock from subterranean shifts of the crust, and less violent quakes still continue to shake the entire area.

These are all examples of what has already happened in California. What are the possibilities for the future?

IN ORDER to determine the probable outcome of the situation, it will be enlightening to look at several other places on Earth where similar factors exist or have existed in the past.

One of the most violently destructive earthquakes of recent times occurred in 1923,

just off the coast of Honshu, the largest of the islands comprising Japan. The focal point of the shock—the epicenter—was luckily underwater, in the central portion of Sagami Bay, just north of the small island of Oshima. Over seven hundred square miles of the floor of the bay was faulted and shifted by the tremendous shock. One area, a little to the south of the Miura Peninsula, tilted toward the edge of the continental shelf; one end of the broken section was lifted up some fifteen hundred feet, while the seaward end dropped more than twenty-four hundred feet—nearly half a mile! In other places, the bottom of the bay was lowered as much as seven hundred to twelve hundred feet.

If the epicenter of the quake had been some twenty-five miles to the north and an equivalent drop had occurred, the whole city of Yokahama would have plunged beneath the surface of the sea. As it was, nearly eighty percent of Yokahama's buildings were destroyed, and many thousands of its inhabitants were killed. Tokyo, fifty miles north of the epicenter of the Sagami quake, lost sixty-five percent of its buildings, and the loss of

life was tremendous.

A similar decrease in elevation would be terribly disastrous in California. A lowering of only five hundred feet would inundate not only the coastal area, including the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, but, entering through the break in the Coastal Range at San Francisco Bay, the sea would flood the entire San Joaquin Valley! The whole section of land between the Coastal Range and the Sierra Nevadas would become a shallow bay. A drop of a full half mile would leave the peaks of the Coastal Ranges as a row of small offshore islands, and the Pacific would reach to the Sierra Nevadas.

Similar floodings of once dry land have taken place in the past; the entire area of the Grand Banks, a shallow portion of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Newfoundland, was once above the surface of the water; at one time there was a wide land bridge spanning what is now the Bering Strait between the western tip of Alaska and the eastern tip of Siberia.

The wide distribution of flood legends; such as that of Noah, in the Book of Genesis, is thought to be caused,

not by a single Great Flood, which covered the entire Earth at once, but many smaller catastrophes which have occurred from time to time throughout the long span of human prehistory. Some geologists are of the opinion that the entire Mediterranean Sea was once dry and that an earthquake broke the chain of land that stretched across the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Iberian Peninsula to Morocco, allowing the Atlantic to pour in and fill the Mediterranean Basin. Many historians feel that the cataclysmic flooding of this area is responsible, not only for the story of Noah, but the legend of Atlantis.

Quite often, earthquakes in or near the sea are followed by what are popularly and erroneously known as "tidal waves." Since such waves have nothing to do with the ordinary tides, geologists, oceanographers, and seismologist refer to them as "seismic sea waves" or as "tsunami," a word borrowed from the Japanese.

These waves radiate from the epicenter of a submarine quake or landslide involving large masses of water, and measuring hundreds of miles from crest to crest. As they ap-

proach a shore, the water at first falls backs toward the the edge of the shelf. Then, as the crest of the wave comes closer, the sea returns, raising the water to great heights until it sweeps irresistibly over the land, washing away everything in its path.

Any one of these phenomena—earthquake, vulcanism, or tsunami—could cause tremendous damage to our west coast. If conditions were right, the combination of all three would precipitate a disaster unparalleled in modern times.

THE NEAREST approach to such a calamity, at least in terms of physical destruction, was probably the explosion of the volcanic island of Krakatoa, in the Sunda Strait of the Netherlands Indies. At some time in the distant past, a huge volcano stood in the center of what is now the Sunda Strait. A vast explosion blew the entire mountain away, leaving only the base as a broken ring of small islands. But the career of the volcano was not ended; as the pressure of the magma beneath the sea floor built up, more small craters were formed within the ring of the great, ancient crater. The largest one, the one we

know as Krakatoa, rose some twenty-six hundred feet above the surface of the sea. There is evidence that the volcano gave warning of its forthcoming activity in 1680; in that year an eruption was reported, and there were great earthquakes in the area. By 1877, earthquakes were common in the Sunda Strait. Then, in May of 1883, the volcano erupted, blowing ash, pumice, and dust into the air and shaking the area with thunderous explosions and earthquakes. This continued all through the summer, with only occasional lulls in the activity.

The climax came on the 26th, 27th, and 28th of August, 1883. Krakatoa quite literally blew its top. The whole northern wall of the cone was blasted away, and the smaller, nearby crater of Rakata lost the northern slope of its cone, revealing a perpendicular cliff which showed an almost perfect cross section of the smaller volcano. Instead of the former island, which had risen nearly fourteen hundred feet above the sea, there was now left only a great hole in the sea bottom, a hole nearly a thousand feet deep. The sound of the explosion was heard all over the world—not once, but

seven times, as the gargantuan energy of the sound wave carried it around the earth, and then around again and again. The debris that was blasted into the air fell all over the area, smothering nearby islands; the finer dust remained in the upper atmosphere for years afterwards, giving the Earth beautiful sunsets and sunrises for over a decade, since it was spread all over the world by air currents. It is estimated that the column of the blast was more than seventeen miles high.

The upthrusting of the ocean floor produced several new islands in the area, and this seismic disturbance, in turn, produced one of the greatest tsunami on record. On the coasts of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, and the other, smaller islands in the vicinity, the destruction caused by the waves was apalling. The waves lifted boats and ships from their moorings, carried them inland, and left them stranded. The cities and towns near the shores were almost completely obliterated by the pounding and washing of the sea. It is estimated that more than thirty-six thousand died as a result of the tsunami.

The explanation for the

vastness of the explosion itself is rather easily understood. Superheated gases absorbed in the tremendously hot magma beneath the crust forced their way out, blowing open the side of the crater. Immediately, sea water rushed in, pouring over the column of molten lava. The resulting steam caused further explosions, and, at the time, a cool crust was formed over the lava, sealing in the pent-up gases below. When the pressure built up again, another explosion followed. The process was repeated until the cooling of the sea finally formed a crust which could hold back the now lessened pressure beneath.

All this has not, of course, stopped the activity in that region. In the years 1927-29, there were more, although less violent eruptions, and today there is another volcano which has built itself on the spot. It is called, appropriately enough, "Anak Krakatoa" or Child Of Krakatoa.

FROM THIS, it is easy to see what would happen if a seismic shift were to open the San Andreas or some other fault in California. The influx of sea water would produce an explosion of titanic propor-

tions—far greater than the blasts at Krakatoa. If the crumbling edge of the continental shelf were to break off and drop into the Pacific, the resulting tsunami would destroy every coastal city on our side of the Pacific and very likely inundate Hawaii.

I have often been asked if it would be possible for an atomic or a hydrogen bomb to cause such a disaster. My answer is this:

If a thermonuclear explosive weapon is detonated on normal, stable portions of the Earth's crust, there is very little likelihood that any such thing would happen. But—and here is the crux of the answer—California is *not* stable. If a thermonuclear bomb were to be set off at just the right spot, near one of the great faults, the resultant energy might be just enough to upset the balance.

But even a close and direct application of atomic energy is not necessary. For the entire area of the Pacific Ocean, its edges and basin, constitutes the thinnest crust of the Earth—and therefore the most volcanic and unstable.

Early this year the Russians set off a series of atomic ex-

plosions somewhere in Siberia. Within a few hours, a chain of earthquakes and tsunami ran down the Pacific from Alaska to Hawaii to California. No one can say just how these were connected—for the exact location and the exact strength of the Russian explosions is their secret. Yet the timing of the subsequent earthquakes was a grave indication that those man-made hammer-blows on the world's crust set off those shocks, sent tremors vibrating through all the faults and cracks of the Pacific.

Just how many more such hammer shocks will be required to crack the shell is unknown. Later this year other such explosions are being planned by British and American experimenters, again in the Pacific volcanic area. Again atomic hammers will pound on the shaky surface of the world's most unstable crust.

How much more of this can the shaky California coast take? Probably not much more. For the evidence is sufficient for all but the blind to see. Disaster may strike at any time. But it now seems that it will be soon. Quite soon.

OBSERVATION PLATFORM

Keeping an eye on mankind is only logical for extra-terrestrials in these H-bomb days—but whose eyes?



by MARTIN PEARSON

OTHER eyes watching? Or was it just another notion to scare the fanciful and foolish? Eyes watching mankind from...somewhere? Impossible, fantastic, illogical? Or was it? Other eyes watching? But of course! *They had better!*

Moodily, Danny kicked a pebble at the pigeons. The birds, disturbed in their incessant foraging and philandering, fluttered away for a moment, then settled down again near his park bench. Danny watched their iridescent feathers ruf-

fling, heard them resume their cooing and puffing, and continued his thoughts.

After all is said and done, humanity is not a sweet creature. Humans are deadly, the deadliest beasts of the Earth. Lions, tigers, snakes, eagles; the wicked wolverine, the snarling panther—all mere bait for a bloodlusting huntsman's holiday. Humans are the only animal that kills en masse, that kills not merely for food, but for sport, for lust, for frenzy, for the whims of political and religious fancies—motives of passing validity, generally discarded or revised after a few short decades in favor of some new excuse for mass butchery.

To a creature living on some other world, a creature that may have achieved the peace of social maturity, this ravening mass of human beasts might well resemble a glass case filled with snakes—with the glass cracking. Snakes, perhaps interesting or instructive to watch, even colorfully pleasing to the eyes, but a screaming, deadly emergency when the glass vanishes. And the humans were removing the glass now!

The drone of an airplane penetrated Danny's mind. His eyes raised to the horizon,

ringed with the towers and skyscrapers of New York around this central park, watched the silvery speck cross the sky en route to some far continent on this planet. Propeller job, thought Danny, but somewhere on this Earth rocket ships are operating. Korea, New Mexico, various proving grounds, Siberia probably, Manchuria certainly, rocket ships of increasing agility, speed, height potential. Somewhere men are working on the application of atomic power to flying craft—several places, Danny was sure. Just a matter of time; maybe just a matter of—months.

Other eyes watching? Other eyes checking, evaluating, pondering... warning? No, thought Danny decisively, this was no speculation. A race hundreds or thousands of years in advance of us could keep watch; more definitely *must* keep watch. The snakes were breaking the glass.

So—where? His eyes swept the horizon, lingering on the tall towers of the world's greatest city, looking at the many thousands of glistening windows shining down at him, looking back at him and the others like him.

A CHILL raced its prickly fingers up and down Danny's spine. Where else indeed? A hundred thousand windows looking down on the central city of the most advanced industrial land of this planet. Certainly from one of those hundred thousand must watch an alien eye.

Danny suddenly got up. He had a month's leave from his work, he had two good friends to share his views, he had no time to lose. He strode off, scattering the pigeons from his path with a great flutter of wings.

The psychometer ticked its silent electronic tick, registering the thoughts around it. The psychometer's sympathetic twin registered by induction a similar set of electronic impulses. A void unthinkable to park pigeons separated the two devices. A host of mechanical things, silent to the observable ear, but a mass of whirling action to a sub-atomic sense, sorted through the series of classifications inconceivable to a human mind and turned up certain indicators. A digit was added to a growing column. Another individual was singled out.

Danny finished his explanation, sat back. He was a lit-

tle tense, he was not sure of his reception. A man doesn't get a reputation for brilliance, a record for philosophy, for proven scientific ability, and risk it all on a speculation as apparently wild as this. But Danny felt sure of his premise, and, in any case, he knew he would have the sympathy of the Tylers. Carla and Jonathan Tyler were that unfortunately rare thing, a happily married couple in their thirties, whose home was always a haven of calm and peace to Danny, whose work was identical with his, and who usually shared his views.

Carla poured some more coffee. "Why should they bother to actually station spies here? It would be a physical nuisance if their physiques were not suited to Earth's atmosphere, and it would present a constant danger of exposure. Wouldn't it be just as practical to simply watch us, say from the moon, through telescopic instruments that could conceivably be exact enough to see our every action?"

Jonathan, sitting silently near the window, shook his head. "I can see Danny's point. Even with the best instruments, they would still en-

counter so much atmospheric interference that it is doubtful if even such an obvious source of information as newsprint could be read from the moon. Not to mention more subtle investigations. There can be no real substitute for getting down among the people themselves to test and record their feelings. You know, Carla, you never can understand a problem from mere theory. You have to get into it, get deeply into it, before you can grasp it. In a matter of this sort, it would be imperative for the 'Other Eyes'—if we might call them that—to overlook nothing."

"Besides," Danny pointed out, "the matter is too important to them, I should think, it only superficial attention. A general surveillance from outer space would have been—probably was—sufficient a few hundred years ago, and for the thousands before that. But today, with atomic developments and ionospheric flights, the situation has become crucial. And where else but New York would be the place to keep an eye on world trends?"

Carla ran a hand through her hair. "And what are we going to do about it? After all, why shouldn't they keep an

eye open to what the World Government is up to? I, for one, am entirely in favor of it. Why should we three interfere?"

"Well, now," Danny said, leaning forward. "The point is that, for better or worse, we are human beings and all in this boat together. We didn't know what these aliens might be like or what they might do. We can't assume they will take a paternal viewpoint—why should they? We wouldn't in a similar situation. If they are creatures that have followed a line of evolution leading to personal intelligence, the same sort of line we followed, I would imagine that their benevolence capacity towards dangerous beasts is no better than our own. I don't think that our finding this spy in our midst would stop their efforts, but it would serve as sufficient proof to alert the world's leaders to the danger."

T'YLER stood up, went to the window. "And where," he waved a hand outwards, "are you going to find your needle in this cement haystack? What do we do, advertise?"

"Wanted—one interplanetary monster. Applicants please be prepared to prove

identity as anti-human spies," Carla laughed.

"That wouldn't get much results, would it?" said Danny. "But, seriously, we should be able to narrow it down. I would say let us put ourselves in the position of an interplanetary spy and see what we would do. Where, for a start, would we locate? It's logical, for a starting premise, to make this city the headquarters. What next?"

Tyler stood at the window, looked out, up and down, and thought. On the broad ledge, two pigeons were preening themselves, in the streets sparrows were hopping about, mothers were wheeling their babies, a dog was sniffing at a post, a car passed occasionally. The noises of the buses on the avenue could be heard. This was a quiet area, near the park, residential. Tyler did not see this street, for example, as an ideal spot for observation. It was closed in.

He raised his eyes. You couldn't see the skyscrapers from here, but he knew that this four-story building's roof could be seen from some of the taller buildings. Why not, as Danny suggested, your alien observation platform in a high floor of a skyscraper from which every major develop-

ment could be seen, from which every building, major and minor, could be surveyed and its inhabitants studied?

He turned away, sat down, and explained this chain of thought.

Carla arched her eyebrows. "Why, with directional apparatus, I should think they could do an awful lot of snooping, couldn't they? Peeping Toms on a grand scale."

"Yes," Danny carried it further. "An electronic hearing device, properly rigged up, could hear at many windows. Good concealed telescopes, in the right high windows, could sweep many of the most important office buildings-buildings that house the executive departments of dozens of the most important American businesses and international agencies. Again, the Other Eye, would need a free means of relaying his messages to his planetary base. With a special narrow-beam render, he could probably do that from the top of a high building without much interference or detection."

Tyler rubbed his jaw. "Then our problem becomes a bit simpler. I would say that we should be able to narrow down the number of buildings best

suited for those purposes to a specific area, figure out which floors would be most useful. Offhand, I would say the party would rent an office in a tower, where he could have access to all four directions. In other words, we have to look for a whole floor—not necessarily a large floor, perhaps a penthouse office—in a very high skyscraper in the lower midtown section of the city. It would be occupied by a firm of no clear occupation, and it might also be distinguished by television masts or something of that nature."

"Hmm." Danny tapped a cigarette against his wrist. "Handled like a true-born detective. Now, as I see it, we have a project for ourselves. Fortunately, we also have the time."

"Martians, look out!" laughed Carla. "Just tell me one thing, boys. Where are you going to put your Martian when you find him?"

THE PSYCHOMETER beat out its emotionless record. On a distant place, in a location not to be easily described, a sympathetically attuned recorder repeated the message. An indicator moved sharply, to call the attention of a non-me-

chanical observer. Note was duly taken.

It took the three of them exactly twenty-two days and six hours to locate the offices described on the bulletin board as *Zenith Enterprises, Penthouse, Take Stairs from 57th Floor*. Carla tried to go up there, telling the express elevator man that she was looking for a secretarial job. The elevator man said he hadn't heard they were hiring, hadn't seen anybody recently except Mr. Blue, and didn't think she could get in just at this time. Which was true, for the door to the penthouse stairs was locked, and there was no answer to her knock.

The elevator man shrugged. "I dunno what they do," he said. "Maybe some kinda clipping bureau, promotion maybe. They get a lotta newspapers. That's about all they get, no regular business mail, come to think of it. Dozens of papers and magazines. Some come airmail, even, from Europe, Japan, even Africa. Must be able to read a lotta languages."

"Do you know when I could see Mr. Blue?" Carla asked.

"Couldn't say, lady, he comes and goes. You don't

wanta work for a firm like that, anyway. They're tight-wads, never handed out a cent come Christmas. But if you still wanna see him, you could hang around some morning. Maybe ask the night man to keep an eye open, too."

Carla thanked him, went back to report her findings. The search had been intensive, but, thanks to Tyler's reasoning, had been speeded up. They had first assembled on a rooftop in the major business area, and from there had observed the buildings that seemed to fit the bill. Of those, several had what might have been either penthouses or elevator shacks. They worked around the problem, finally pinned it down.

This looked like a good thing. Zenith Enterprises did not have a telephone listing, oddly enough, though there may have been a private wire. The building management declined to advance any information about their tenant and the help knew but little. Carla's lead about a man named Blue was about all they could find out.

Danny and Tyler agreed to stand watch in the building lobby to see who went up to the fifty-seventh floor. They

hoped to see the man before they approached him. Danny took the first watch, standing by the starter, kidding him a bit, bribing him by promising that if they could sell Mr. Blue some insurance, the starter would get a ten-spot.

Mr. Blue did not show up that day.

In a distant place, not on the map of Earth, a number of beings conferred. Before them the registers of the psychometers reeled off their unending records, including the latest reading on the search being conducted by three humans.

I find this of very great interest, observed one being. A very simple plan of action revealed a target. This is rather incredible. Do you suppose they will really uncover the observer? And what will happen then? I do not favor having action precipitated sooner than necessary. No action at all is still the most desirable course. But, another being pointed out, we may have to interfere....

PIGEONS were strutting before the entrance of the skyscraper. You would never know there was a problem like this, thought Carla, as she made her way into the lobby.

The sun is shining, the sky is soft and blue. It's wonderful spring weather. Do you suppose it enjoys this?

Carla had courage. She was going to see Mr. Blue. She had written to him, after the three had discussed the matter. She was going to see him now, as per the hour she had set. They had decided on their approach. They would act innocent, as simple scientific observers. Their intent would be merely to learn, to bask in the light of another world's genius.

Just what they would actually do they were none too sure. It would probably involve calling on the International Bureau of Investigation, or otherwise involving the World Government. Actually, Danny was somewhat idealistic. He felt that perhaps a more advanced world would not really want to damage humanity. Maybe they could even be persuaded to befriend us. Even a snake can be charmed, as Danny explained, and if they regard humanity as a deadlier snake, still, it might pay to be nice to it.

So they wrote a letter to Mr. Blue of Zenith Enterprises. Not a crazy letter, charging him with what they thought, but a rather subtle one. If the

observer could read between the lines, he would be caught. If he chose to act innocent, he would be permitted to get away with it, and they would then follow a different procedure.

Carlo got off at the fifty-seventh floor and went to the stairs. The metal door leading to the penthouse, which had been locked when last she had been there, was open. She climbed the stairs and came to a smooth wooden door, neatly lettered with the firm name. She knocked.

The door opened. A little bald man, somewhat less than five feet tall, with thick round glasses, let her in, smiled to her, waved a hand and led her silently into the main office.

Wide windows faced a great panorama of the city; the sweep of Manhattan could be seen in all its glory. Several short, thick-barreled telescopes stood around on movable stands, and there were thick cables leading to and from several large boxes with dials and controls...in short, *this was it!*

Subconsciously Carla knew it. There would be no subterfuge.

She sat down in front of the desk. Danny and her husband

would be on the fifty-seventh floor landing by now, waiting for an emergency call. She wondered if anything would really happen to her. Somehow she doubted it.

"You are the lady who wrote me," said the little man, seating himself opposite her. She watched his face. It seemed friendly, sympathetic. The thought suddenly occurred to her that this was probably a very cunning mask, a face of back at her.

"I wonder just what you expect of me" he said. "Surely you are not interested in black-artificial, fleshlike substance. The face of Mr. Blue smiled mail. No one would be likely to believe you, and I could easily remove my little establishment."

HIS DELIBERATE frankness left Carla perplexed. She had assumed a conversational gambit about a mythical job, in which she would slowly lead the "Other Eye" into error, then would confront him with the charge. It had not even occurred to her that she would have to answer to a simple admission like this.

"I really don't think we expected anything. My husband and I are merely investigators of scientific phenomena. We

conjectured your existence as an exercise in what I suppose should be termed the interplanetary viewpoint, and, frankly, I am a little amazed to find it so easily proven. Where are you from?"

Mr. Blue leaned back, folded his hands. "Now, really, I do not think it fair of you to ask. I appreciate your attitude; After all, I am an investigator of extraplanetary phenomena also. I see that you realize the alarm that moves my native world at the thought of being neighbors to a planet as dynamic and explosive as yours."

"Mars?" said Carla, becoming suddenly excited. "Venus?" Incredibly, a flash of recognition went through her, like an electric shock. Here was an actual non-Terrestrial! The infinites this prospect opened!

"Neighbors' is a relative term. It all depends on the speed of your transport; you really must not assume anything. Besides, I am forced to assure you, your own people will discover where I come from during their next two or three generations."

He stood up. "If you wish some information in advance of your descendants, would

you please be so kind as to call up your husband and his friend from downstairs. We can all go over the matter together."

Carla went to the head of the penthouse stairs and called down. Danny and Tyler, who were getting anxious, dashed up. Back in Mr. Blue's office, the three were seated, while Mr. Blue, standing up, began a little lecture.

"I must begin by informing you that there are many inhabited worlds," he commenced....

The psychometer bank carried the whole thing. The central non-mechanical being manipulated certain devices, touched certain hitherto unused arrangement.

Mr. Blue stood in his office, alone. For a while he stood there, looking thoughtfully across his desk at the three chairs that had been moved from their usual spots. He walked over to the penthouse stairs, closed the door. Returning to his desk, he sat down, started to unwrap the newspapers that had arrived that morning, prepared to transmit their contents photostatically to the moon base, from where the Ganymede home Observatory would pick them up, ana-

lyse their developments. Mr. Blue thought to himself, as he worked, that he had better apply for a replacement. He was getting a bit absent-minded lately.

CARLA, Danny, and Tyler sat on a bench in Central Park, feeding the pigeons. "I have the strangest feeling that I've forgotten to do something," said Carla.

"Did you remember to turn off the gas?" said her husband. "You know I feel that way too."

Danny looked up at the towers around him. "Sometimes I wonder if there wouldn't be observers from some other world hidden among these buildings, watching us humans climb towards the interplanetary rocket and the atomic drive?"

Carla laughed. "You do get the silliest ideas," she giggled. "You need to get back on the job in the lab again. You know that's just a lot of unscientific moonshine."

Danny scratched his head. "I guess it is," he said, feeling foolish and a bit perplexed. "But, you know, somehow I can't seem to remember how we spent the past month."

"Time does fly, doesn't it?" Carla said. "Well, that's how vacations go."

The psychometer ticked away. On a place somewhere else in the universe, a sympathetic device removed an indicator from a special surveillance rack, sent it back among the electronic whirl again. But soon a different indicator was aglow. Several non-mechanical beings watched this new one.

Humanity is still a century or so away from being a direct problem, observed one. We can handle it. But the Ganymedeans now—they are a mere two or three centuries ahead of humanity, and that is a tricky period. They do not have psychometers, nor the advantages of ten thousand more years of civilization...they are the snake unleashed. We must keep a closer watch on Mr. Blue....

A little man with thick glasses left an office building that afternoon, his day's chores

done, and set off home. A pigeon flew from his path with a desperate flapping of wings.

A mutationally devised and inherited arrangement of natural bones within the skeleton of the pigeon—of all the pigeons in all the human cities—whose special qualities could be detected only on an electronic scale, ticked out Mr. Blue's thought as he passed. The tick was repeated by sympathetic induction on a bank of similar recorders in a place elsewhere than Earth. Hundreds of thousands of such psychometric bones in hundreds of thousands of pigeons from one end of the world to the other ticked off the thoughts of the average man for another world's observers. Some of the emitters of thought were not so average. And one was not of this Earth at all.

THE END

THE ELEPHANT CIRCUIT

by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

The exposition was easily the biggest John Watts had ever seen, and he'd seen them all. Yet, besides its size, there was something else strange about this fair—it was just a little out of this world!

RAIN STREAMED across the bus's window. John Watts peered out at wooded hills, content despite the weather. As long as he was rolling, moving, traveling, the ache of loneliness was somewhat quenched. He could close his eyes and imagine that Martha was seated beside him.

They had always traveled together; they had honeymooned covering his sales territory. In time they had covered the entire country—Route 66, with the Indians' booths beside the highway, Route 1, up through the District, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, zipping in and out through the mountain tunnels, himself hunched over the wheel and Martha beside him, handling

the maps and figuring the mileage to their next stop.

He recalled one of Martha's friends saying, "But, dear, don't you get tired of it?"

He could hear Martha's bubbly laugh. "With forty-eight wide and wonderful states to see, grow *tired*? Besides, there is always something new—fairs and expositions and things."

"But when you've seen one fair you've seen them all."

"You think there is no difference between the Santa Barbara Fiesta and the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show? Anyhow," Martha had gone on, "Johnny and I are country cousins; we like to stare at the tall buildings and get freckles on the roofs of our mouths."

"Do be sensible, Martha." The woman had turned to him. "John, isn't it time that you two were settling down and making something out of your lives?"

Such people tired him. "It's for the 'possums," he had told her solemnly. "They like to travel."

The opossums? What in the world is he talking about, Martha?"

Martha had shot him a private glance, then dead-panned, "Oh, I'm sorry! You see, Johnny raises baby 'possums in his umbilicus."

"I'm equipped for it," he had confirmed, patting his round stomach.

That had settled her hash! He had never been able to stand people who gave advice "for you own good."

Martha had read somewhere that a litter of new-born opossums would no more than fill a teaspoon and that as many as six in a litter were often orphans through lack of facilities in mother 'possum's pouch to take care of them all. They had immediately formed the Society for the Rescue and Sustenance of the Other Six 'Possums, and Johnny himself had been unanimously selected

—by Martha—as the site of Father Johnny's 'Possum Town.

They had had other imaginary pets, too. Martha and he had hoped for children; when none came, their family had filled out with invisible little animals: Mr. Jenkins, the little grey burro who advised them about motels, Chipmink the chattering chipmunk, who lived in the glove compartment, *Mus Followalongus* the traveling mouse, who never said anything but who would bite unexpectedly, especially around Martha's knees.

They were all gone now; they had gradually faded away for lack of Martha's gay, infectious spirit to keep them in health. Even Bindlestiff, who was not invisible, was no longer with him. Bindlestiff was a dog they had picked up beside the road, far out in the desert, given water and succor and received in return his large and uncritical heart. Bindlestiff had traveled with them thereafter, until he, too, had been called away, shortly after Martha.

John Watts wondered about Bindlestiff. Did he roam free in the Dog Star, in a land lush with rabbits and uncovered

garbage pails? More likely he was with Martha, sitting on her feet and getting in the way. Johnny hoped so.

HE SIGHED and turned his attention to the passengers. A thin, very elderly woman leaned across the aisle and said, "Going to the Fair, young man?"

He started. It was twenty years since anyone had called him "young man." "Unh? Yes, certainly." They were *all* going to the Fair; the bus was a special.

"You like going to fairs?"

"Very much." He knew that her inane remarks were formal gambits to start a conversation. He did not resent it; lonely old women have need of talk with strangers—and so did he. Besides, he liked perky old women. They seemed the very spirit of America to him, putting him in mind of church sociables and farm kitchens—and covered wagons.

"I like fairs, too," she went on. "I even used to exhibit—quince jelly and my Crossing-the-Jordan pattern."

"Blue ribbons, I'll bet."

"Some," she admitted, "but mostly I just liked to go to them. I'm Mrs. Alma Hill Evans."

ans. Mr. Evans was a great one for doings. Take the exposition when they opened the Panama Canal—but you wouldn't remember that."

John Watts admitted that he had not been there.

"It wasn't the best of the lot, anyway. The Fair of '93, there was a fair for you! There'll never be one that'll even be a patch on that one."

"Until this one, perhaps?"

"This one? Pish and tush! Size isn't everything." The All-American Exposition would certainly be the biggest thing yet—and the best. If only Martha were along, it would seem like heaven. The old lady changed the subject. "You're a traveling man, aren't you?"

He hesitated, then answered, "Yes."

"I can always tell. What line are you in, young man?"

He hesitated longer, then said flatly, "I travel in elephants."

She looked at him sharply and he wanted to explain, but loyalty to Martha kept his mouth shut. Martha had insisted that they treat their calling seriously, never explaining, never apologizing. They had taken it up when he had planned to retire; they had

been talking of getting an acre of ground and doing something useful with radishes, or rabbits, or such. Then, during their final trip over his sales route, Martha had announced after a long silence, "John, you don't want to stop traveling."

"Eh? Don't I? You mean we should keep the territory?"

"No, that's done. But we won't settle down, either."

"What do you want to do? Just gypsy around?"

"Not exactly. I think we need some new line to travel in."

"Hardware? Shoes? Ladies' ready-to-wear?"

"No." She stopped to think. "We ought to travel in *something*. It gives point to your movements. I think it ought to be something that doesn't turn over too fast, so that we could have a really large territory, say the whole United States."

"Battleships perhaps?"

"Battleships are out of date, but that's close." Then they had passed a barn with a tattered circus poster. "I've got it!" she had shouted. "Elephants."

"Elephants, eh? Rather hard to carry samples."

"We don't need to. Every-

body knows what an elephant looks like. Isn't that right, Mr. Jenkins?" The invisible burro had agreed with Martha, as he always did; the matter was settled.

Martha had known just how to go about it. "First we make a survey. We'll have to comb the United States from corner to corner before we'll be ready to take orders."

For ten years they had conducted the survey. It was an excuse to visit every fair, zoo, exposition, stock show, circus, or punkin doings anywhere, for were they not all prospective customers? Even national parks and other natural wonders were included in the survey, for how was one to tell where a pressing need for an elephant might turn up? Martha had treated the matter with a straight face and had kept a dog-eared notebook: "La Brea Tar Pits, Los Angeles—surplus of elephants, obsolete type, in these parts about 25,000 years ago." "Philadelphia—sell at least six to the Union League." "Brookfield Zoo, Chicago—African elephants, rare." "Gallup, New Mexico—stone elephants east of town, very beautiful." "Riverside, California, Elephant

Barbershop—brace owner to buy mascot." "Portland, Oregon—query Douglas Fir Association. Recite *Road to Mandalay*. Same for Southern Pine group. N.B. this calls for trip to Gulf Coast as soon as we finish with rodeo in Laramie."

Ten years and they had enjoyed every mile of it. The survey was still unfinished when Martha had been taken. John wondered if she had button-holed Saint Peter about the elephant situation in the Holy City. He'd bet a nickel she had.

But he could not admit to a stranger that traveling in elephants was just his wife's excuse for traveling around the country they loved.

The old woman did not press the matter. "I knew a man once who sold mongooses," she said cheerfully. "Or is it 'mongeese'?" He had been in the exterminator business and—what does that driver think he is doing?"

The big bus had been rolling along easily despite the driving rain. Now it was swerving, skidding. It lurched sickeningly—and crashed.

JOHN WATTS banged his head against the seat in

front. He was picking himself up, dazed, not too sure where he was, when Mrs. Evans' thin, confident soprano oriented him. "Nothing to get excited about, folks. I've been expecting this—and you can see it didn't hurt a bit."

John Watts admitted that he himself was unhurt. He peered near-sightedly around, then fumbled on the sloping floor for his glasses. He found them, broken. He shrugged and put them aside; once they arrived he could dig a spare pair out of his bags.

"Now let's see what has happened," Mrs. Evans went on. "Come along, young man." He followed obediently.

The right wheel of the bus leaned drunkenly against the curb of the approach to a bridge. The driver was standing in the rain, dabbing at a cut on his cheek. "I couldn't help it," he was saying. "A dog ran across the road and I tried to avoid it."

"You might have killed us!" a woman complained.

"Don't cry till you're hurt," advised Mrs. Evans. "Now let's get back into the bus while the driver phones for someone to pick us up."

John Watts hung back to

peer over the side of the canyon spanned by the bridge. The ground dropped away steeply; almost under him were large, mean-looking rocks. He shivered and got back into the bus.

The relief car came along very promptly, or else he must have dozed. The latter, he decided, for the rain had stopped and the sun was breaking through the clouds. The relief driver thrust his head in the door and shouted, "Come on, folks! Time's a-wastin'! Climb out and climb in." Hurrying, John stumbled as he got aboard. The new driver gave him a hand. "'Smatter, Pop? Get shaken up?"

"I'm all right, thanks."

"Sure you are. Never better."

He found a seat by Mrs. Evans, who smiled and said, "Isn't it a heavenly day?"

He agreed. It was a beautiful day, now that the storm had broken. Great fleecy clouds tumbling up into warm blue sky, a smell of clean wet pavement, drenched fields and green things growing—he lay back and savored it. While he was soaking it up a great double rainbow formed and blazed in the eastern sky. He

looked at them and made two wishes, one for himself and one for Martha. The rainbows' colors seemed to be reflected in everything he saw. Even the other passengers seemed younger, happier, better dressed, now that the sun was out. He felt light-hearted, almost free from his aching loneliness.

They were there in jig time; the new driver more than made up the lost minutes. A great arch stretched across the road: THE ALL-AMERICAN CELEBRATION AND EXPOSITION OF ARTS and under it PEACE AND GOOD WILL TO ALL. They drove through and sighed to a stop.

Mrs. Evans hopped up. "Got a date—must run!" She trotted to the door, then called back, "See you on the midway, young man," and disappeared in the crowd.

John Watts got out last and turned to speak to the driver. "Oh, uh, about my baggage. I want to—"

The driver had started his engine again. "Don't worry about your baggage," he called out. "You'll be taken care of." The huge bus moved away.

"But—" John Watts stopped; the bus was gone. All very well—but what was he to

do without his glasses?

But there were sounds of carnival behind him, that decided him. After all, he thought, tomorrow will do. If anything is too far away for me to see, I can always walk closer. He joined the queue at the gate and went in.

IT WAS UNDENIABLY the greatest show ever assembled for the wonderment of mankind. It was twice as big as all outdoors, brighter than bright lights, newer than new, stupendous, magnificent, breathtaking, awe inspiring, supercolossal incredible—and a lot of fun. Every community in America had sent its own best to this amazing show. The marvels of P.T. Barnum, of Ripley, and of all Tom Edison's godsons had been gathered in one spot. From up and down a broad continent the riches of a richly endowed land and the products of a clever and industrious people had been assembled, along with their folk festivals, their annual blow outs, their celebrations, and their treasured carnival customs. The result was as American as strawberry shortcake and as gaudy as a Christ-

mas tree, and it all lay there before him, noisy and full of life and crowded with happy, holiday people.

Johnny Watts took a deep breath and plunged into it.

He started with the Fort Worth Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show and spent an hour admiring gentle, white-faced steers, as wide and square as flat-topped desks, scrubbed and curried, with their hair parted neatly from skull to base of spine, then day-old little black lambs on rubbery stalks of legs, too new to know themselves, fat ewes, their broad backs paddled flatter and fatter by grave-eyed boys intent on blue ribbons. Next door he found the Pomona Fair with solid matronly Percherons and dainty Palominos from the Kellog Ranch.

And harness racing. Martha and he had always loved harness racing. He picked out a likely-looking nag of the famous Dan Patch line, bet and won, then moved on, as there was so much more to see. Other county fairs were just beyond, apples from Yakima, the cherry festival from Beaumont and Banning, Georgia's peaches. Somewhere off be-

yond him a band was beating out, "Ioway, Ioway, that's where the tall corn grows!"

Directly in front of him was a pink cotton candy booth.

Martha had loved the stuff. Whether at Madison Square Garden or at Imperial County's fair grounds she had always headed first for the cotton candy booth. "The big size, honey?" he muttered to himself. He felt that if he were to look around he would see her nodding. "The large size, please," he said to the vendor.

The carnie was elderly, dressed in a frock coat and stiff shirt. He handled the pink gossamer with dignified grace. "Certainly, sir, there is no other size." He twirled the paper cornucopia and presented it. Johnny handed him a half dollar. The man flexed and opened his fingers; the coin disappeared. That appeared to end the matter.

"The candy is fifty cents?" Johnny asked diffidently.

"Not at all, sir." The old showman plucked the coin from Johnny's lapel and handed it back. "On the house—I see you are with it. After all, what is money?"

"Why, thank you, but, uh, I'm not really 'with it,' you know."

The old man shrugged. "If you wish to go incognito, who am I to dispute you? But your money is no good here."

"Uh, if you say so."

"You will see."

He felt something brush against his leg. It was a dog of the same breed, or lack of breed, as Bindlestiff had been. It looked amazingly like Bindlestiff. The dog looked up and wagged its whole body.

"Why, hello, old fellow!" He patted it—then his eyes blurred; it even felt like Bindlestiff. "Are you lost, boy? Well, so am I. Maybe we had better stick together, eh? Are you hungry?"

The dog licked his hand. He turned to the cotton candy man. "Where can I buy hot dogs?"

"Just across the way, sir."

He thanked him, whistled to the dog, and hurried across. "A half dozen hot dogs, please."

"Coming up! Just mustard, or everything on?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I want them raw, they are for a dog."

"I getcha. Just a sec."

Presently he was handed six wienies, wrapped in paper. "How much are they?"

"Compliments of the house."

"I beg pardon?"

"Every dog has his day. This is his."

"Oh. Well, thank you." He became aware of increased noise and excitement behind him and looked around to see the first of the floats of the Priests of Pallas, from Kansas City, coming down the street. His friend the dog saw it, too, and began to bark.

"Quiet, old fellow." He started to unwrap the meat. Someone whistled across the way; the dog darted between the floats and was gone. Johnny tried to follow, but was told to wait until the parade had passed. Between floats he caught glimpses of the dog, leaping up on a lady across the way. What with the dazzling lights of the floats and his own lack of glasses he could not see her clearly, but it was plain that the dog knew her; he was greeting her with the all-out enthusiasm only a dog can achieve.

He held up the package and tried to shout to her; she waved back, but the band music and the noise of the crowd made it impossible to hear each other. He decided to enjoy the parade, then cross and find the pooch and its mistress as soon as the last float had passed.

It seemed to him the finest Priests of Pallas parade he had ever seen. Come to think about it, there hadn't been a Priests of Pallas parade in a good many years. Must have revived it just for this.

That was like Kansas City—a grand town. He didn't know of any he liked as well. Possibly Seattle. And New Orleans, of course.

And Duluth—Duluth was swell. And so was Memphis. He would like to own a bus someday that ran from Memphis to Saint Joe, from Natchez to Mobile, wherever the wide winds blow.

Mobile—there was a town.

The parade was past now, with a swarm of small boys tagging after it. He hurried across.

The lady was not there, neither she, nor the dog. He looked quite thoroughly. No dog. No lady with a dog.

HE WANDERED off his eyes alert for marvels, but his thoughts on the dog. It really had been a great deal like Bindlestiff...and he wanted to know the lady it belonged to—anyone who could love that sort of a dog must be a pretty good sort herself. Perhaps he could buy her ice-

cream," or persuade her to do the midway with him. Martha would approve he was sure. Martha would know he wasn't up to anything.

Anyhow, no one ever took a little fat man seriously.

But there was too much going on to worry about it. He found himself at St. Paul's Winter Carnival, marvelously constructed in summer weather through the combined efforts of York and American. For fifty years it had been held in January, yet here it was, rubbing shoulders with the Pendleton Round-Up, the Fresno Raisin Festival, and Colonial Week in Annapolis. He got in at the tail end of the ice show, but in time for one of his favorite acts, the Old Smoothies, out of retirement for the occasion and gliding as perfectly as ever to the strains of *Shine On, Harvest Moon*.

His eyes blurred again and it was not his lack of glasses.

Coming out he passed a large sign. SADIE HAWKINS DAY— STARTING POINT FOR BACHELORS. He was tempted to take part; perhaps the lady with the dog might be among the spinsters. But he was a little tired by now: just ahead there was an

outdoor carnival of the pony-ride-and-ferris-wheel sort; a moment later he was on the merry-go-round and was climbing gratefully into one of those swan gondolas so favored by parents. He found a young man already seated there, reading a book.

"Oh, excuse me," said Johnny. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," the young man answered and put his book down. "Perhaps you are the man I'm looking for."

"You are looking for someone?"

"Yes. You see, I'm a detective. I've always wanted to be one and now I am."

"Indeed?"

"Quite. Everyone rides the merry-go-round eventually, so it saves trouble to wait here. Of course, I could hang around Hollywood and Vine, or Times Square, or Canal Street, but here I can sit and read."

"How can you read while watching for someone?"

"Ah, I know what is in the book—" He held it up; it was *The Hunting of the Snark*.—"so that leaves my eyes free for watching."

Johnny began to like this young man. "Are there boojums about?"

"No, for we haven't softly and silently vanished away. But would we notice it if we did? I must think it over. Are you a detective, too?"

"No, I—uh—I travel in elephants."

"A fine profession. But not much for you here. We have giraffes—" He raised his voice above the music of the calliope and let his eyes rove around the carrousel. "—camels, two zebras, plenty of horses, but no elephants. Be sure to see the Big Parade; there will be elephants."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it!"

"You mustn't. It will be the most amazing parade in all time, so long that it will never pass a given point and every mile choked with wonders more stupendous than the last. You're sure you're not the man I'm looking for?"

"I don't think so. But see here—how would you go about finding a lady with a dog in this crowd?"

"Well, if she comes here, I'll let you know. Better go down on Canal Street. Yes, I think if I were a lady with a dog I'd be down on Canal Street. Women love to mask; it means they can unmask."

Johnny stood up. "How do I get to Canal Street?"

"Straight through Central City past the opera house, then turn right at the Rose Bowl. Be careful then, for you pass through the Nebraska section with Ak-Sar-Ben in full sway. Anything could happen. After that, Calaveras County—Mind the frogs!—then Canal Street."

"Thank you so much." He followed the directions, keeping an eye out for a lady with a dog. Nevertheless he stared with wonder at the things he saw as he threaded through the gay crowds. He did see a dog, but it was a seeing-eye dog—and that was a great wonder, too, for the live clear eyes of the dog's master could and did see everything that was going on around him, yet the man and the dog traveled together with the man letting the dog direct their way, as if no other way to travel were conceivable, or desired, by either one.

HE FOUND himself in Canal Street presently and the illusion was so complete that it was hard to believe that he had not been transported to New Orleans. Carnival was at height; it was Fat Tuesday here; the crowds were masked. He got a mask

from a street vendor and went on.

The hunt seemed hopeless. The street was choked by merrymakers watching the parade of the Krewe of Venus. It was hard to breathe, much harder to move and search. He eased into Bourbon Street—the entire French Quarter had been reproduced—when he saw the dog.

He was sure it was the dog. It was wearing a clown suit and a little peaked hat, but it looked like his dog. He corrected himself; it looked like Bindlestiff.

And it accepted one of the frankfurters gratefully. "Where is she, old fellow?" The dog woofed once, then darted away into the crowd. He tried to follow, but could not; he required more clearance. But he was not downhearted; he had found the dog once, he would find him again. Besides, it had been at a masked ball that he had first met Martha, she a graceful Pierrette, he a fat Pierrot. They had watched the dawn come up after the ball and before the sun had set again they had agreed to marry.

He watched the crowd for Pierrettes, sure somehow that

the dog's mistress would costume so.

Everything about this fair made him think even more about Martha, if that were possible. How she had traveled his territory with him, how it had been their habit to start out, anywhere, whenever a vacation came along. Chuck the Duncan Hines guide and some bags in the car and be off. Martha...sitting beside him with the open highway a broad ribbon before them...singing their road song *America the Beautiful* and keeping him on key: "—thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears—"

Once she had said to him, while they were bowling along through—where was it? The Black Hills? The Ozarks? The Poconos? No matter. She had said, "Johnny, you'll never be President and I'll never be First Lady, but I'll bet we know more about the United States than any President ever has. Those busy, useful people never have time to see it, not really."

"It's a wonderful country, darling."

"It is, it is indeed. I could spend all eternity just traveling around in it—traveling in

elephants, Johnny, with you."

He had reached over and patted her knee; he remembered how it felt.

The revellers in the mock French Quarter were thinning out; they had drifted away while he daydreamed. He stopped a red devil. "Where is everyone going?"

"To the parade, of course."

"The Big Parade?"

"Yes, it's forming now." The red devil moved on, he followed.

His own sleeve was plucked. "Did you find her?" It was Mrs. Evans, slightly disguised by a black domino and clinging to the arm of a tall and elderly Uncle Sam.

"Eh? Why, hello, Mrs. Evans! What do you mean?"

"Don't be silly. Did you find her?"

"How did you know I was looking for anyone?"

"Of course you were. Well, keep looking. We must go now." They trailed after the mob.

The Big Parade was already passing by the time he reached its route. It did not matter, there was endlessly more to come. The Holly, Colorado Boosters were passing; they were followed by the prize

Shriner drill team. Then came the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan and his Queen of Love and Beauty, up from their cave in the bottom of the Mississippi . . . the Anniversary Day Parade from Brooklyn, with the school children carrying little American flags . . . the Rose Parade from Pasadena, miles of flower-covered floats . . . the Indian Powwow from Flagstaff twenty-two nations represented and no buck in the march wearing less than five hundred dollars worth of handwrought jewelry. After the indigenous Americans rode Buffalo Bill, goatee jutting out and hat in hand, locks flowing in the breeze. Then was the delegation from Hawaii, with King Kamehameha himself playing Alii, Lord of Carnival, with royal abandon, while his subjects in dew-fresh leis pranced behind him, giving aloha to all.

There was no end. Square dancers from Ojai and Cheyenne Mountain and from up-state New York, dames and gentlemen from Annapolis, the Cuero, Texas, Turkey Trot, all the Krewes and marching clubs of old New Orleans, double flambeaux blazing, nobles throwing favors to the crowd—the King of Zulus and his

smooth brown court, singing: "*Everybody who was anybody doubted it—*"

And the Mummers came, "taking a suit up the street" to *Oh Dem Golden Slippers*. Here was something older than the country celebrating it, the shuffling jig of the masquers, a step that was young when mankind was young and first celebrating the birth of spring. First the fancy clubs, whose captains wore capes worth a king's ransom—or a mortgage on a row house—with fifty pages to bear them. Then the Liberty Clowns and the other comics and lastly the ghostly, sweet string bands whose strains bring tears.

Johnny thought back to '44 when he had first seen them march, old men and young boys, because the proper "shooters" were away to war. And of something that should not be on Broad Street in Philadelphia on the first day of January, men riding in the parade, merciful Heaven forgive us, they could not walk.

He looked and saw that there were indeed automobiles in the line of march—wounded of the last war, and one G.A.R., hat square, hands folded over the head of his crane. Johnny held

his breath and waited. When each automobile approached the judges' stand, it stopped short of it, and everyone got out. Somehow, with each others help, they hobbled or crawled past the judging line, under their own power—and each club's pride was kept intact.

There followed another wonder—they did not get back into the automobiles, but marched on up Broad Street.

THEN IT was Hollywood Boulevard, disguised as Santa Claus Lane, in a production more stupendous than movieland had ever attempted before. There were baby stars galore and presents and favors and candy for all the children and all the grown-up children, too. When, at last, Santa Claus's own float arrived, it was almost too large to be seen, a veritable iceburg, almost the North Pole itself, with John Barrymore and Mickey Mouse riding one on each side of Saint Nicholas.

And the elephants came.

Big elephants, little elephants, middle-sized elephants, from pint-sized. Wrinkles to mighty Jumbo...and with them bull men, Chester Conk-

lin, P. T. Barnum, Wallis Beery, Mowgli. "This," Johnny said to himself, "must be Mulberry Street."

There was a commotion on the other side of the column; one of the men was shooing something away. Then Johnny saw what it was—the dog. He whistled; the animal seemed confused, then it spatted him, scampered up, and jumped into Johnny's arms. "You stay with me," Johnny told him. "You might have gotten stepped on."

The dog licked his face. He had lost his clown suit, but the little peaked cap hung down under his neck. "What have you been up to?" asked Johnny. "And where is your mistress?"

The last of the elephants were approaching, three abreast, pulling a great carriage. A bugle sounded up front and the procession stopped. "Why are they stopping?" Johnny asked a neighbor.

"Wait a moment. You'll see."

The Grand Marshal of the march came trotting back down the line. He rode a black stallion and was himself brave in villain's boots, white pegged breeches, cu'away, and top hat. He glanced all around.

He stopped immediately in front of Johnny. Johnny held the dog more closely to him. The Grand Marshal dismounted and bowed. Johnny looked around to see who was behind him. The Marshal removed his tall silk hat and caught Johnny's eye. "You, sir, are the Man Who Travels in Elephants?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Uh? Yes."

"Greetings, Rex! Serene Majesty, your Queen and your court await you." The man turned slightly, as if to lead the way.

Johnny gulped and gathered Bindlestiff under one arm. The Marshall led him to the elephant-drawn carriage. The dog slipped out of his arms and bounded up into the carriage and into the lap of the lady. She patted it and looked proudly, happily, down at Johnny Watts. "Hello, Johnny! Welcome home, darling!"

"Martha!" he sobbed—and Rex stumbled and climbed into the carriage to embrace his queen.

The sweet voice of a bugle sounded up ahead, the parade started up again, wending its endless way—

A TIME OF PEACE

Is a holiday just for fun, or does it mean something more? A boy of the future sets out to find the lost answer to a certain mystifying celebration.

By the author of The death of Grass.

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

THE ROOM was strung with lines of glittering colored crystal balls, which varying electricity set tinkling at intervals in odd patterns of sound. Momma and Poppa were watching, across the breakfast table, the TV screen on the opposite wall. It was showing a band and some kind of woman singer. The music almost drowned the minor tinklings.

Poppa saw him first. "Hello, son! Merry Christmas."

Momma turned and smiled. "Merry Christmas, darling."

He repeated dutifully: "Merry Christmas."

Momma said: "Your breakfast's under the infra. Run and get it."

He went through to the kitchen, switched the infra-red heater off, and collected his breakfast. On his way back to

the dining room he paused by the door; it was a habit he developed recently. Poppa was saying:

"...when I was his age. They couldn't tear me away from them. I remember when I was eleven I got one of those big electronic toy cranes—I dragged the whole darned lot downstairs with me. I was in trouble for that."

Momma said: "Beyond a certain point one can't do anything."

He brought his breakfast in and set it down at his place. The television was changing. The announcer said: "This is just to remind you, folks, that the next snowfall, arranged by the Weather Bureau, is due to start at ten Greenwich. This applies to the whole country south of Hull. Northern regions will get their snow an hour



SCUNTA ST

later. Now we want all the kiddies to put down those toys and stop munching candy, and get ready to get outside and snow-fight. And mommas and poppas and aunties and uncles, too. Let's all get snow in our hair, because today's Christmas."

The screen dissolved and was reintegrated into a view of a snowy lawn with a background of one of the new great steel houses that were becoming so popular with the leaders of the entertainment world. The announcer's voice followed as a discreet background. "They don't seem to be here. Let's have a look towards the grove. Ah, yes! There we are."

The five participants in the snow fight were all instantly recognizable to the TV audience. Louie Karenko, short, balding, ecstatically jovial. His beautiful wife, Bora, carefully windswept. And their three children, Maxie, Percy and Daisy, who had their own distinctive parts in their parents' famous 'K-hour' program. The camera followed dutifully as a well-aimed shot from Maxie caught his mother in the back of the neck and arrowed in to a close-up of the delicious gasp as she wrinkled up her face from the shock.

"How about it, S? Shall we go out and tear that snow up after breakfast?"

He said: "If you would like to, Poppa."

"What about you? Wouldn't you like to?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you."

He heard the *in drawn* breath of exasperation from his mother. His father said, patiently good-humored: "You haven't told us yet. How did you like your presents?"

"They were very nice. Thank you."

"Have you fitted up your spaceship yet?"

"Not yet."

"Or played your sonophone? I haven't heard any noises from it."

"No, Poppa. Not yet."

"We could get your electric sleigh out after breakfast and give you a run round the hill."

"Yes, Poppa."

"Well, shall we?"

"If you would like me to."

His mother spoke very quietly: "Seba! Don't you think it would be nicer to show a little enthusiasm and gratitude for all the lovely Christmas presents you have had?"

He sat without saying anything, finishing his breakfast.

"Can't you say something?" After a further pause, "Do you want us to send you back to Mr. Lewisson?"

He shook his head quickly. There had been two visits to Mr. Lewisson, for a month the first time, and for three months this last summer. The memory of Mr. Lewisson's avuncular tolerance, of Mr. Lewisson's persistent, imperturbable questionings, was still very strong.

His father intervened. "Is there something you're disappointed about, S.? Was there something you particularly wanted that we didn't get you? You don't tell us much, you know."

He looked up. "I would have liked a book."

His mother smacked her lips lightly.

His father said: "But I have explained to you, son. It's years since books were made—not since before you were born."

"It wouldn't have needed to be a new book."

"But why a book? You don't want to have the place lit by candles instead of luminlight, do you? Books can't tell you the things TV can." He flicked the remote control, and the screen showed the dozen pro-

grammes currently available. "Through the Rings of Saturn." That's the new serial. What about that?"

Without waiting for a reply, he touched the controls again and the screen changed. On one of the moons—it looked like Mimas from the way Saturn bulked across a quarter of the sky—two space-suited figures pursued a third. They fired their Klaberg pistols and the explosive charges ricocheted rosily off spurs of rock.

His father said appreciatively: "That's good camerawork."

His mother said: "You aren't watching it, are you, Seba?"

He had finished his breakfast. He looked up. "Momma. What is Christmas?"

His father supplied the answer. "Today's Christmas. It's a holiday. People are kind to each other and give presents."

"Is that all?"

"It should be enough," his mother said. Her voice was sharp. "It should be enough that people are friendly and happy."

"But why?"

"His father laughed: "Why summer? Why winter? Why Labor Day? Words aren't important. You should enjoy things more, S., and worry less

about what they mean."

"Yes, Poppa."

His mother got up and went to the window. Outside the sky was grey with a tinge of rose far down on the horizon. She stood, looking out.

She said: "You don't realize how lucky you are, Seba. My grandmother used to tell me how when she was a little girl there were wars and troubles of all kind. People fighting and killing each other; and ordinary houses, like this, having explosives dropped on them from airplanes. In many parts of the world men, women and children starved for want of food. We live in an altogether different kind of world today."

He said: "Yes, Momma."

His father said: "Well, let's not brood about the bad old days! Now, S., what about getting that sleigh out? We can build a snowman, too. Are you ready?"

THHEY WENT OUT together, leaving the TV screen still flickering and talking behind them. It was very quiet outside. The house was built into the snow-covered hillside which stretched barely down for over a quarter of a mile before the next house broke its line. His father got the new

electric sleigh out and checked the batteries. Then the two of them clambered on it and with a soft *whirr* were off, heading slantwise up towards the brow of the hill, the snow furrowing slightly away from their curved prow. At 709 Mr. Larks was standing outside. He waved to them as they passed twenty yards away, and they waved back. At the top of the hill, his father cut the motor off. They stood up.

"Visibility's not so bad," his father said. "Look, there's the sea."

It was a line of deeper grey beneath the grey arc of sky. His father turned, pointing westwards sharply.

"Watch that!"

The grey was split by a gash of scarlet flame. At its apex there was a glimpse of something silvery.

"That's the new Venus rocket. Think of it going through space—beyond the moon, to Venus. That's something to look at."

"Why is it called a rocket?"

His father laughed again. "Who knows? Why Christmas?"

The flame had faded away before the sound came, a rumbling like a dozen interlinked thunder-slaps.

"Ready for down, son? We can coast home."

They swept easily down the hill. At one point they startled a hare and saw it scutter away from them across the snow. As the arch of the house came in sight the new fall of snow started; a few, feathery particles which soon turned into great drifting flakes. It was snowing very thickly when they tumbled off the sleigh.

"Well," his father asked, "a snowman?"

He shook his head.

"At any rate, we've had a breather. I guess you'd like to get back to those presents. Come on in."

His mother had removed the table and, when they entered, was lying back watching the TV screen.

"It's the Toasto program," she said.

His father settled beside her.

He said: "I'm going up to my room, Momma." He paused. "To play with my presents."

He did go into his room, and stayed for a time fingering the presents stacked beside his bed. It was still snowing outside. The heat from the inside of the house misted the window panes. He cleared a patch with

his hand and looked out. Down the hill and into the valley everything was white except the colored roofs of the houses, regularly spaced five hundred yards apart. The houses were all warm, so that the snow melted right off their roofs. He knew that. Above 715—the Ashtons—a gyro hovered before settling in to land. The snow thinned, and finally stopped falling. Someone at the Weather Bureau had pulled a switch.

He looked at the model spaceship. He read: "When properly fitted up and charged, the *Space Star* is guaranteed to travel in an arc, between Vertical 100 ft.—Horizontal 10 ft. and Vertical 20 ft.—Horizontal 150 ft., parachuting down subsequently without danger to bystanders."

He went out and stood, listening at the top of the stairs. There was a sudden wave of increased sound from the TV. The Toasto program lasted an hour. He turned and walked quietly along the landing. The lumber room was at the end. He pressed the opening button, and went in.

THERE HAD BEEN a lot of talk about clearing out

the lumber room; fitting it up, perhaps, as a TV room for anyone who wanted a program different from that in the dining room or lounge. Momma was always talking about it. Poppa kept putting it off. He remembered their talking.

"Does it *matter*, Ella?"

"The place isn't hygienic... all that rubbish."

"I don't know. We always used to have a lumber room at home."

"That's just sentimental. We ought to clear it out. After all, it's only a matter of putting the stuff down the chute."

"I will, Ella. When I get the time."

He pressed the closing button. The small room was stacked high with old trunks and cases, the intervening spaces being filled with all manner of objects which had outgrown their use or value. The four nearest cases he had already gone through, marveling at the old clothes and papers and ornaments stuffed in them. He would start now on the big green trunk. He found the catch, and threw the creaking lid back.

For the most part it contained clothes again. He dragged them out, examining

them curiously. Under the clothes was a stuffed grey parrot in a battered cage. Underneath there was a book.

It had no covers, and it was torn. Many of the pages were loose. He picked it out carefully. He began reading where it fell open:

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

He was still reading when his mother found him at last. The door slid open, and he heard her voice behind him:

"So that's where you are, Seba! Did you know we've been hunting you for over an hour?" She turned her head for a moment. "He's here. Sitting amongst all this dirt and rubbish. Now will you agree that

it ought to be got rid of?"

His father said, from the landing: "I guess you're right, Ella. I'll get down to it tomorrow."

"No!" she said. "Do it now. Empty all the trunks and put the rubbish down the chute. I'll have the garbage call for the trucks next week." She took his arm. "As for you, we'll give you a bath right away."

He still had the book in his hand as his mother led the way along to the bathroom. She caught sight of it at last.

"What's that?"

"It's a book, Momma. I think it's about Christmas."

She took it away from him, but not roughly.

"Seba," she said. "I want to speak seriously to you. Your Poppa and I try very hard to have things nice for you. You know that not many people in these parts have children. They don't like being tied down by them. Now we don't mind doing anything that will make you happy. But you don't help us very much. You didn't let Mr. Lewisson help you properly when you went to stay with him. And now, with all these nice presents to play with, with the TV to watch, with your Poppa willing to play games

with you in the snow, what do you do? You go and sit amongst all that old rubbish. Why do you do these things, Seba?"

He said: "I'm sorry, Momma." He hesitated. "Could I keep the book?"

Her face tightened. "No. You can't. It's dirty."

He tried to reach for it, but she tossed it quickly into the bathroom chute. He saw it slide down and disappear.

He was silent while she supervised his bathing. The words he had been reading were running through his mind. He was thinking about them, about their music and their message.

His mother dried him swiftly. She straightened her back and looked at him.

"Now. We aren't going to sulk, are we?"

He knew quite certainly that he would never lose them; that they were his, now and for always.

"No, Momma", he said. He smiled, and at that her face relaxed, and she smiled with him. "Merry Christmas, Momma."

THE HOT POTATO

by ALAN BARCLAY

At last, the Solar System's desperate defenders had a real break—an invader ship had been captured intact. Of course, if they fumbled their find, it might blow the planet to pieces—but there just had to be a way to juggle that nuclear dud . . . or was there?



THE ALIEN spaceship stood, alone, empty, with its hatch open, not very far from a native community on Mars. How it came there or where the Jacko occupants had gone to was a prevailing mystery—perhaps they had committed suicide. Whatever their final destination the ring of human guards surrounding the ship at a respectable mile distance would see that they didn't get back inside the craft. For that matter no human or Martian was allowed inside the

cordon either—for the Jacko ship had become like the proverbial baked potato at a picnic, too hot to handle for the time being.

The military unit guarding the alien ship was commanded by Captain Nicholls, who had been in the Space Navy at one time, but was transferred out for the sufficient but non-heroic reason that his stomach just would not adapt itself to no-gravity conditions. So now was serving with the ground contingent on Mars. He would



probably stay on Mars all his life—and eventually die there. He was one of those slouching, easy-mannered officers who have a talent for command and who run their organisation efficiently without apparently exerting themselves.

His headquarters was a plastic tent, which was standard military equipment on Mars. It was airtight and its interior could be maintained at earth-normal pressure by means of a little air-pump.

Captain Nicholls lay on his bed at one side of this tent, long legs crossed and arms folded behind his head. At the other side of the tent Joe, his radio-man, squatted in front of communications equipment. Since contact with parties of his men as well as with the rest of Mars was maintained almost entirely by radio, Captain Nicholls and Joe were constantly together. In fact, they were close friends.

Although Captain Nicholls was lying supine he was nevertheless busy with his morning's routine work. With his eyes closed, visualising the lay-out of the company, he put out queries.

"Joe," he said to the ceiling, "get Sergeant Jackson to re-

port whether he has changed guard round the ship. Ask him to repeat his orders about allowing no one to approach."

Joe did this, and made a number of other routine checks.

"Now," Nicholls said, "I must send in a report about this affair... Can you get North Pole Base with that talking machine of yours?"

"You know I can't," Joe grunted. "You've asked me that a dozen times, and I've told you. North Pole Base is round the curve of this rotten little planet, and we've got no decent ionosphere to bounce the waves off."

"I remember. Well then, call the civilian base at Lancaster, send them the message, and ask them to pass it on."

"I can do that," Joe told him, "but they'll muck it up. They always do."

"You can listen-in on them, and check up," Nicholls told him soothingly. "Here's the message: To Officer Commanding, Space Navy Base, North Pole: Sir, I have the honour—you know the rest of that guff as well as I do, Joe—the operation against the Jacko spaceship discovered in this locality has been complet-

ed with some measure of success. On being prevented from returning to their ship the four aliens who formed its crew disappeared and probably committed suicide. The ship itself has been captured intact—that'll please them, Joe. The following personnel were killed—give the names of the two chaps who copped it, Joe—the following action has been taken pending further instructions: ONE: Civilian Terence Hartington Falkenberg, who originally notified us of the presence of this ship and who has managed close observations with the aliens before our arrival here, has been put on his way up to North Polar Base as his personal impressions are considered to be of first importance. TWO: A guard has been set round the ship at a distance of a mile, and will be maintained till further instructions are received. THREE: The ground in the neighbourhood of the points where the Jackoes disappeared is being searched for bits and pieces of Jacko and/or spacesuits containing same. FOUR: Detailed narrative of events and impressions is being prepared and will be despatched. Signed Jeff Nicholls, Captain."

"I don't reckon this bit about 'bits and pieces of Jacko and/or space-suits' makes sense," Joe objected.

"It creates a brisk business-like flavor. End it out, Joe."

"D'you reckon you might get a commendation or maybe even a medal for this job, Jeff?" the radio-man asked. "It's been a nice clean job. These four Jackoes might have wiped out the village if we hadn't been slick."

"No," Nicholls opined. "No medals. More likely a black mark for letting the Jackoes get away."

"You're dead sure the ship's fixed to blow itself up if anyone goes near?"

"Not dead sure," Nicholls told him, "but every Jacko ship discovered out in space has blown up as soon as anyone got within five hundred yards of it."

"So what are you going to do about this one?"

"Precisely nothing. I've carried out orders, made the native village safe, dispossessed the Jackoes and captured the ship. From now on I'm merely the officer in charge of the guard, thank heaven. No doubt H. Q. will send down a team of highly-trained super-men to

de-fuse the ship, and right welcome they are to the job."

JOE PASSED a cigarette over to his Captain. When Joe and Nicholls were not busy being radio-op and Captain respectively, rank was forgotten. This was due to a number of causes. In the first place their duties required them to pass most of their existence together. Both were disillusioned men; neither could hope to rise above his present rank. Both were stuck permanently on Mars, Joe for health reasons, Nicholls for psychological ones. Both were bachelors, partly because they had passed the age of young love, partly because women were still scarce on Mars—scarce, expensive to entertain, and even more expensive to keep.

There was another very curious reason for this friendship between the two men. They were both enthusiasts for the same hobby. They spent their leisure making model aircraft.

Joe sent out Captain Nicholls' message to H.Q. and a number of routine matters in addition, then he lit another cigarette and returned to the subject.

"Does anyone know how

these Jackoes arrange to make their ships blow up?" he asked.

"The experts talk about proximity fuses," Nicholls said.

Joe snorted. "That's just a couple of words. Reminds me of ancient medieval explanations—a magnet attracts iron because it contains a certain principle which has the capacity to attract iron."

"You're a well-read guy, aren't you?" Nicholls said admiringly. "Have you got an explanation?"

"Not me. I read a story once about a super-bomb which had a super-fuse in it. This fuse was a sort of brain; it detected the thoughts of anyone approaching, and if it didn't like what the bloke was thinking it blew itself up."

"What they needed in that case was some guy whose thoughts were wholly pure. Forget the whole thing Joe. De-fusing the ship isn't our worry. Let's have a look at Matilda."

Joe went over to a large service-type crate, raised the lid, and with utmost tenderness lifted out their latest project—Matilda. Matilda was a model helicopter. It was a work of the greatest ingenuity. It was powered by a minute battery driv-

ing a double set of contrarotating rotors which were necessary in the thin atmosphere of Mars, and it was manoeuvred by a radio remote-control. They tried it out inside the tent.

"The remote control isn't satisfactory yet," Joe said, "but I've fixed up with Corporal Sanders to have a nasty accident with his communications set. After that has happened we should have enough stuff to rebuild it."

"Go easy with those accidents, Joe," Nicholls warned him. "The accident rate for electronic equipment in this unit is pretty phenomenal already."

"Don't worry about that," Joe told him. "There's money in this gadget. When I've got over this remote-control snag I'm going to fit a small television camera in it, and the whole set-up can be used as a long-ranged look-see. It'll sell like hot cakes to those monied businessmen back home on Earth."

"What on earth would they use a thing like this for?"

"Well, like this. These businessmen work in offices all day and make stacks of money. With this money they get them-

selves film stars and other sorts of expensive dames as wives, so they have to keep going to offices to make more money to keep these dames. But they can't really get down to this task on account of worrying about what those dames are doing back home. Now they'll be able to fly Matilda back home once or twice every day and have it pop in at a window to look-see who their dames are entertaining."

"There's a snag," Nicholls told him solemnly. "The dames'll get wise and keep all the windows shut. Unless you can fix Matilda with a gadget to open windows as well. But, seriously, I agree we've got a money-making gadget there."

They were both wrong about that, of course.

IT TOOK four days for a party of experts to get down from H.Q. They were uniformed men from the Technical Branch, and all senior to Nicholls. Their arrival necessitated the erection of additional tents, and an alteration to the messing arrangements.

"Now," Joe said, licking his lips, "now we'll see genius at work."

The experts walked all

round the ship, keeping at a safe distance. From that range it looked just like a space-ship. After that they had spent a lot of time photographing it through long-focus lenses. The developed pictures resembled close-ups of a space-ship.

The experts cross-examined Nicholls and some of his men. Nicholls was a specialist in being cross-examined. He had troubles himself from time to time and sympathized with other people's, but did not intend to make himself a scapegoat. He avoided the luxury of speculation and surmise and similar forms of thought, and confined himself to statements of observed fact.

The experts presently went away, and when they got back to Polar Base they wrote a report.

The report said that the space-ship was undoubtedly a space-ship, that it had been examined thoroughly and that the personnel concerned in its discovery had been questioned. The report regretted that the officer in charge had allowed the Jackoes to escape and felt reluctantly compelled to remark that much information might have been obtained had this unfortunate event

been prevented. It ended by saying that as the ship might possibly be fitted with some kind of self-destroying device they had refrained from approaching too close. They recommended that the appropriate department be instructed to remove the fuse, after which they would continue their examination.

Nicholls, of course, did not see this report, but he guessed it.

"You mustn't misjudge them, Joe," Nicholls told him. "There's no want of courage. But some higher-up has to C.K. every venture, and if it fails he's got to do a lot of apologizing to the Space Navy Commission to console them for the loss of one captured space-ship. That sort of thing affects a fellow's career, you know—if the fellow's got a career. Suppose the case was different; suppose the ship merely killed every man who approached without harming itself, you'd find heroic and high-spirited souls queueing up to take the chance and nobody trying to stop them. It's the ship that's irreplaceable, not the heroes."

"These visitors didn't seem to have a clue," Joe grunted.

"They talked a lot. They reckon that out in space these Jacko ships are fitted with a gravity fuse. The point is that out there the only gravity is the ship itself, and that's not much. If a man-sized body comes within half a mile the local gravitational field is sensibly altered, a needle swings over, contact is made, and bang."

"Well?" Joe asked. "Why shouldn't the scheme operate here too?"

"It might, but there are additional difficulties. In the neighbourhood of this ship of ours at the present moment there's a considerable hunk of material called Mars, so that a human being doesn't cause any noticeable change in the local gravitational field. Mind you, even so, a fuse could work, but it would be a very delicate job."

"A gravitational fuse seems like the final barrier—the fuse to end all fuses," Joe commented. "The fuse can't be neutralized until a man goes right in and neutralizes it, and he can't go in without carrying his own hunk of gravity-along. Pity a gravitational field can't be screened like an electro-magnetic field."

"Not our worry, old son," Nicholls reassured him, getting up off his bed.

THEY WENT outside into the open and began to put Matilda through her paces. Matilda responded well to her radio controls within a radius of five hundred yards, but beyond that her reactions were erratic.

"We want a better control-transmission system," Joe told Nicholls. "We've gotta have one more communications set before we get this perfect."

Three representatives of the Explosion Research and Development Branch arrived next day.

These three earned their living by dabbling with explosives and had in consequence acquired an embittered and fatalistic philosophy of life. Nicholls got on with them better than he had with the previous bunch.

"Very commendable of you," they congratulated him. "It's a near-miracle how you've restrained both yourself and your licentious soldiery from trying to walk up and scratch initials on the hull. We must mention that in our report, if we live."

"You're going to defuse it?" Nicholls asked.

"It's customary," one of the three explained. "We draw lots to decide who'll do the job."

"There are easier ways of earning a living," Nicholls pointed out.

"Not easier," the other objected. "This is one of the easiest going. I admit some jobs last longer, but few are easier..."

"So how do you go about it?"

"It isn't simple," the speaker explained. "We've been ordered to make no attempt to defuse the thing unless we devise a scheme which gives a reasonable prospect of success, so with one side of our heads we try to invent a scheme, and with the other we keep hoping we never will."

The Explosives Specialists did not stay long. It was soon clear to them that from a distance of a mile they could not accumulate any information on which to formulate a plan. They sent a report to H.Q. to this effect, and proposed that the only thing to do was to draw lots to see which of them should walk over to the ship. H.Q. vetoed this suicidal pro-

posal, and the Explosives men departed, quite cheerfully.

The Jacko ship stood out in the desert, its round entrance hatch open, as if inviting a visit.

Nicholls looked over at the ship each time he made his rounds. "Suppose it has no fuse at all?" he thought. "Wouldn't that be a big laugh?"

He considered this idea, and decided that it was quite likely. The Jackoes unquestionably fitted their ships with proximity fuses designed to operate out in space, but perhaps they had no device adapted to gravity conditions.

Their next visitor was a fighter-scout. His name was Charters, and he had recently returned to Mars from an advanced base out in the asteroids.

"So what special interest do you have in this business?" Nicholls asked him.

"Quite simple," the other told him. "I've come here to make an examination of the ship."

"How?"

"By walking across there and crawling inside, of course."

"A lot of people think it's

rigged up with a proximity fuse."

"I know, but we don't reckon that's possible in the circumstances. If we're wrong, it's too bad for me, but I've taken big chances before."

"Does H.Q. at Polar Base know about this?"

"Good heavens no. I heard about this ship after I arrived, and of course I discussed it with some of our people at Polar Base, that's all. Our point is that we have no time to wait while Technical Branches muck about. We are really keen to know as soon as possible what sort of works that ship has got. So we decided to short-circuit all the red-tape and do the job ourselves."

"I see," Nicholls nodded, then "Joe!"

"Yessir?"

"Whistle up Sergeant Smith. Tell him to come over here on the double, and to bring a couple of men with him."

"Yessir," Joe replied, and turned to his radio.

The newcomer and Nicholls continued to talk about this and that for the next five minutes, then Sergeant Smith came in through the air-lock of Nicholls' H.Q. tent and saluted.

"I've got the two men you asked for outside, sir," he said.

"Right, Sergeant!" Nicholls nodded. "This officer is Lieutenant Charters. He tells me he intends to walk out to our Jacko ship and inspect it. He has no authority to do so, and your orders are to stick with him day and night as long as he is here and to see that he doesn't. In case you're worried about the possibility of using physical force on an officer, I'll give you these orders in writing, and signal them to H.Q. Polar Base. Thus you'll be happy in your work. On the other hand if you slip up on this thing you'll be in real trouble. Quite clear about this sergeant?"

The sergeant looked Charters up and down and said he was.

"Well I'm damned," Charters exclaimed. "I take it you aren't very much interested in getting on with the war—just anxious to keep your nose clean."

"Listen son!" Nicholls told him. "I long ago missed the boat for promotion and I'm past having military ambitions of any sort; in addition, there's no one disobeyed more orders and broken more regulations

than myself. But when there is some order which prevents well-meaning but feather-headed school-boys like yourself from committing suicide and destroying valuable captured material as well, I reckon it's a good order and I mean to enforce it. You're welcome to stay here as long as you like but you'll have these watchdogs on your tail all the time."

"You'll not refuse to let me send a message?" Charters demanded.

"Of course not. The Radio-Op will send out anything you give him," Nicholls promised.

Charters stayed only two days. He sent a signal to someone at H.Q. trying to get Nicholls' order over-ruled, but the only result was a peremptory instruction to return to H.Q. at once.

Charters departed. The Jacko ship stood in the desert.

NICHOLLS and Joe devoted all their leisure time to perfecting the controls of Matilda. These activities were not unconnected with the destruction of two more service intercom sets, the requisitioning of two replacements from H.Q., and a memo from H.Q. asking for an explanation of the high

rate of destruction of these items in Nicholls' unit.

For a while they had no visitors. Judging by the radio traffic on the subject, the captured ship was being passed briskly from department to department on paper. Nicholls received questionnaires from Intelligence, from a research group which was still known as Aircraft Design, from Tactical Planning, and from the Committee on Metals and Alloys. He himself and the ship and his men and the locality as a whole were the subject of a television programme relayed back to earth.

But the ship still stood on the sands, unvisited, unapproached, untouched. For reasons which do not require elucidation here, the men had christened it the Patient Virgin.

Matilda had now reached a state of near-perfection. She was a thing of joy. One day Joe squatted on the floor of the hut. He was oiling Matilda's tiny motor with a hair-like syringe.

"It's agreed by all concerned," he asked, "that the ship does have a gravity fuse?"

"Not by all concerned," Nicholls corrected. "Some think it has no fuse at all."

Others think its gravity fuse won't work in planetary conditions."

"Let's assume it's a gravity fuse," Joe proposed, screwing a watchmaker's lens into his eye. "Then there must be a minimum hunk of matter which will make it click. What I mean is, even though the fuse would click over if a man climbed in through the hatch, perhaps it wouldn't if a mouse did the same thing; or a bee; or a fly."

"That's sound enough. I think that sort of argument might apply to any sort of fuse."

Joe cleared his throat. "Do you think Matilda would make the fuse click?" he asked.

There was a long, long pause, while Nicholls made a high-speed mental examination of all the implications of this remark.

"You old—" he exclaimed at last. "I bet that idea's been simmering away at the back of your mind for some time!"

"Maybe," Joe agreed. "What d'you think of it?"

"It's a sound enough idea, to which the answer unfortunately is, no. I don't want to finish my days as a broken-down discharged soldier driv-

ing a truck around North Polar Base."

"Listen to me, Captain," Joe said earnestly. He very rarely gave Nicholls his title when they were alone. "The Big Brains have been chewing at this problem for weeks now, and it's clear that it's too tough for them. When they get around to admitting this fact to themselves, who are they going to toss it to next? The answer is, right back to you. And when it does land back in your lap you won't be able to avoid making an attempt to de-fuse it yourself. Don't you see what will happen? When you and the ship are both blown up, the experts will say, 'Poor fellow! Misguided enthusiasm! My department was working on the problem, and would certainly have come up with an answer quite soon. So much valuable information lost to us as a result of this ill-advised action. Why were we not consulted before this rash step was taken?'"

"Reading these signals you send out has made an embittered man of you," Nicholls commented. "I agree with a lot of it, of course. I agree that it may be tossed back into my lap. I think that circumstances may force me to try to de-fuse

it, and I think that if I do I shall very probably be blown to bits. But I think that is preferable to being thrown on the junk-pile while still alive."

"If we sent Matilda to visit the ship," Joe went on, "if we set up a control behind a hill-
ock somewhere, and did it about sunset, none of the men would know what we were doing. Nor are they likely to see Matilda if we fly her near the ground. So if the ship does blow up when Matilda comes near, who can be blamed? The guard will supply evidence that no one was seen approaching the ship. But above all no one will be missing. It'll be a clear case of spontaneous detonation, and all concerned will be much relieved. Especially you."

"You've got a powerful argument there, Joe," Nicholls conceded. "But I don't see what we gain by sending Matilda over to examine the ship."

"Neither do I," Joe confessed. "But one piece of information leads to another. I reckon we might proceed step by step until we finally crack this job."

THEY DID it that very evening. They walked out into the desert carrying the model

and its control equipment. They set up the control equipment on some high ground from which they could look down towards the ship.

Matilda's little motor whirred, and she rose vertically off the ground. They kept her flying at a height of only two feet, and chose a course among the sand-hills that concealed her from the guards. The television eye in her fuselage sent back a tiny clear picture of her immediate surroundings, which made it easy for her controller to avoid hitting anything.

As she approached the ship Joe and Nicholls held their breath. "No need to go slow, Joe," Nicholls said. "If it blows up, it blows up, and that's all there is to it."

Matilda approached within a hundred yards of the ship—fifty yards—twenty yards. Details of the metal-work, seam-welds, scratches, and surface markings could be observed clearly. Matilda moved to within a yard of the metal hull.

Nicholls let out a long whistling breath.

"Well—What now?"

"A thorough inspection," Joe told him.

Matilda climbed all the way

up the tall side of the ship, and tried to peer in at the nose-window. Nothing could be seen inside. The far side of the hull could not be examined of course because Matilda's control-beam would be blanketed by the ship itself. They brought her down the flank of the ship, and let her peer in at the open hatch. The shadowy outline of girders and tubing could be observed.

"Joe," Nicholls said, "up till now you've had most of the ideas, but I'm just beginning to have a few myself. Fly Matilda inside the hatch. Just inch her inside as far as you can. If the damn thing doesn't blow itself up we can proceed with my idea."

Joe was lying on his stomach on the ground, gently manipulating the control rod attached to the radio-control while he peered at the screen of the small television receiver.

"It's pretty shadowy inside," he muttered. The screen grew dark as Matilda, hanging on her whirring motors, advanced into the alien ship. "Right inside now," he announced.

"Good!" Nicholls agreed. "Enough for today. Bring her back."

Matilda came whirring back.

They put her away in her box and walked back to their tent.

NICHOLLS stretched himself on the bed in his customary posture and lit a cigarette. Having then assured himself that the affairs of his company were running smoothly, he allowed his mind to return to the escapade of Matilda and the space-ship.

"What's the weight of Matilda?" he asked Joe.

"About seven pounds Martian," Joe told him. "I've lost the habit of estimating weights in earth-pounds."

"O.K. then," Nicholls reflected. "We now know that a seven pound weight can approach right up the ship without causing a nasty accident."

"So all we gotta do is pick a specially intelligent five-day old child and tell him to crawl inside the ship and disconnect the fuse."

"We could fly Matilda right inside the ship and have a look-see at the works."

"What good would that do?" Joe asked.

"Knowledge is power," Nicholls told him solemnly. "If we knew the layout, knew what the fuse looked like that would be a big step forward."

"Matilda's smart," Joe ob-

jected, "but not smart enough to see in the dark."

"It'd be a mere ten-minute job for a wizard of the soldering iron-like yourself to rig a light-bulb in her fuselage."

"I suppose so," Joe admitted, "but here's objection number two—you're proposing to manoeuvre Matilda inside the ship, right? Now, Matilda's controlled by a radio-beam that won't penetrate through the metal of the hull. In other words, Matilda passes out of control the minute we set her to climb upwards inside the ship."

"Objection sustained," Nicholls conceded.

He lit another cigarette, and stared at the ceiling some more. After five minutes he spoke again.

"All the time I've been here I've resisted the temptation to tinker with this problem. But if I'm likely to be ordered presently to solve it, the more I find out about the ship the better."

"That doesn't make it easier to control Matilda through a metal hull."

"In a way it does," Nicholls told him calmly, "for it has caused me to have a brainwave. Build a relay and cause

Matilda to fly it out to the ship and set it down just inside the lock. When you send out a control-impulse it hits the relay lying in the hatchway, and is reradiated inside the ship. The relay's got to be made to send us back Matilda's television picture too."

Joe considered this. "Not at all bad," he approved. "A relay's not a very complex thing. But I've got to make a release as well so that the relay can be set down."

"I'm sure you'll manage a little thing like that," Nicholls told him confidently.

"Oh, yeah? All very easy for you, lying on your back giving off brainwaves. This particular brainwave's going to cost me a week of work."

In actual fact he did it in a couple of days and tested it and it worked.

"Except there's a snag," he said.

"Then don't look so happy about it," Nicholls told him. "Tell."

"The total weight of Matilda plus the relay is now ten pounds, not seven. We know the ship doesn't blow up when seven pounds rubs against it. Can you guarantee that it

won't go off with ten pounds?"

"Of course I can't. You've got to cut the weight down."

"How?"

"The power-pack, of course. Our present power-pack is good for three hours, I think. Cut it down to one. Matilda can fly out, explore the ship's innards for nearly half-an-hour, then fly back for a recharge."

"It gets more and more complicated, doesn't it?" Joe grumbled.

THEY WENT out together at dusk and set up the control equipment in the same position as before. Joe attached the square box that was the relay to Matilda's fuselage, and tested the magnetic release a couple of times to make sure it functioned. Then he sent the little toy whirring down over the sand dunes. Peering into the television screen, it almost seemed to Nicholls that he was in the helicopter himself riding down towards the alien ship. Seen through Matilda's television eye, the ship came near and the dark opening of the hatch yawned big and dark and mysterious.

"Move over and let me have a good view of this," Joe told

him. "I gotta steer Matilda through that hole."

He held the long control rod lightly between finger and thumb. The picture in the screen bobbed up and down as he manipulated it. He reached forward and clicked a switch. The picture brightened as a flood of light poured from the tiny high-efficiency bulb in Matilda's nose. Parts of the interior of the ship could now be seen clearly; an immense tube on the central axis, ducts, bracing members, something that looked like a sort of lift, and a narrow circular passage extending upwards.

"We've got to drop this relay where it will be able to receive our control-signals and transmit them up that central passage. That's the direction we want to go exploring."

"Pretty crowded in there," Joe commented. He was concentrating hard. With tiny movements of the controls he was causing Matilda to move slowly up and down and around inside the hatch-way.

"Nobody's going to provide capacity inside a space-ship just to carry empty space around. Every cubic inch of a machine like that has got to

be planned for some use," Nicholls told him.

"I'll set the relay down on this shelf," Joe said to himself. He grunted and muttered a bit more, then suddenly his hand darted out and he clicked a switch.

"There," he exclaimed. "Relay now in position. I'd better bring Matilda back for a recharge. You know, if we had one of these super-intelligent mutated white rats you read about in science-fiction stories, things would be a lot simpler. We'd just send the rat in to have a look round, then come back and report."

"The rat would probably take over the space-ship and blast off with it," Nicholls objected. "No... Matilda's safer."

They recharged Matilda's battery and sent her back. This time by means of the relay it was possible to make her ascend the vertical shaft right into the interior of the ship. The light in Matilda's nose illuminated bare metal walls, ducts, occasional recesses, fittings whose purpose could only be guessed at. The top of the shaft, which was perhaps fifty to seventy feet above ground, emerged into a wide

chamber. It was possible to see that this place contained a great deal of complex equipment, but Matilda's lamp was not sufficient to light up the place clearly.

"Matilda's suspended above the shaft, getting my signals from the relay below, but if she moves away from there the signals may be screened, and she'll go out of control," Joe said.

"We need another relay," Nicholls told him.

"A second relay at the top of the shaft," Joe agreed reasonably, then with a shift to heavy sarcasm, "and what would you set it down on-air? Remember it's got to hang over the shaft in order to receive signals and to re-transmit the television wave-bands."

"Let's have Matilda back now," Nicholls told him. "We'll think the next part of the problem over till to-morrow."

Next day Nicholls received the order he had been expecting for some time. He was instructed to take whatever steps he thought proper in order to investigate the details of the alien ship, to report back from time to time, and to avoid the running of unnecessary

risks either by himself or his personnel.'

"It's all yours, Captain," Joe told him sardonically. "Right back on your plate."

"Yes. It's too hot for anyone else to hold and I happen to be Johnn y-on-the-spot. In attempting to carry out this order I cause myself and the ship to blow up, thus relieving everybody of a sticky problem."

"You could do nothing," Joe suggested.

"Then H.Q. keeps asking for results till at last I'm prodded into walking out there."

"The ship might have no fuse," Joe said.

"That would be a big laugh for me," Nicholls agreed.

"We could test that," Joe offered. "Get Matilda to carry chunks of rock through the hatch, one at a time, till the total weight is more than a man, then if the ship hasn't blown up in the meantime, you know it will be safe to enter. So then Matilda removes the rock and you go in yourself, feeling ever so safe. On the other hand, if the ship blows up, the only sufferers will be Matilda and a lot of bits of rock."

"Quite sound, but I think

we'll keep that as a last resort."

"Sure," Nicholls told him. "First, we'll get an automatic camera and hitch it to that television receiver, then everything Matilda sees will be recorded and available for later. Next, we'll replace that light in Matilda's nose with a focussed beam. Then we send Matilda up the shaft, keep her suspended over the shaft so that she's under control, and make her turn around slowly, so as to shine the beam on one thing after another. Anything the light shows up will be photographed by the camera."

"Good enough—but you'll have to requisition a camera. That's something I can't make up out of sardine tins."

"Sure," Nicholls agreed. "Now we're officially in the de-fusing business, I can requisition anything."

IT TOOK them a week to get the changes made and the camera delivered, but after that they were able to proceed with more speed, for as Nicholls said, they were officially in the de-fusing business and he was able to use his men to help. Once again therefore, the party lay out on the sand hills

above the ship. Joe operated the controls, while a second man supervised the camera.

As soon as Matilda got within a couple of yards of the hatch, the camera was switched on and continued automatically to take a photograph every ten seconds. Matilda was now provided with a powerful focussed beam of light directed along the line of sight of her television eye. Joe made her ascend the vertical shaft slowly and caused her at the same time to revolve, so that every part of the walls was examined. Whenever some important-looking item of equipment showed up, Matilda was made to pause while two or three photographs were taken of it.

Matilda rose into the middle of the chamber at the top of the shaft, and remained suspended there, rotating slowly on her vertical axis. A business-like and meaningful array of instruments and equipment was disclosed. Nicholls photographed everything.

Matilda was made to rise further. In the middle of the room there was suspended a ball of transparent material about six inches in diameter. It was possible to bring Matilda quite close to the thing and ex-

amine it in detail. Inside the ball was a long thin needle balanced in the manner of a compass, except that it was dipping sharply downwards. The needle was surrounded by a cage or network of fine glittering golden wires.

"Joe!" he exclaimed sharply, "Move Matilda away from the ball!"

Joe did so, and the thin needle tilted upwards a little, away from the mesh of wires surrounding it.

"That," said Nicholls, "is the gravity fuse we've been looking for. Notice that out in space any slight change in the gravitational field surrounding the ship would be sufficient to make the needle tilt. Down here it can't be effective over such a great range, but it's suspended over the shaft, as you see. Any change in the gravitational field in the shaft, made for example by a man entering and starting to climb it, will tilt the needle. When it tilts enough to touch that mesh of wires—Bingo!"

"The Jackoes climb the shaft from time to time," Joe pointed out.

"Of course they do, but not until they've disconnected the fuse circuit."

"Anyway, that's the fuse sure enough," Joe agreed, "and I reckon if we'd brought Matilda another three inches nearer, it would have gone off. Did you notice how much the needle was tilted before you told me to bring Matilda away from it?"

"I did. We've been lucky there. Let's not overlook that point."

CAPTAIN NICHOLLS went back to his tent, laid himself down on the bed as usual, and began to dictate.

To Officer i/c Polar Base:

"I have the honour to report that an examination has been carried out of the interior of the space-ship in accordance with your instructions received yesterday—give the date and reference, Joe, and I bet those few simple words make the whole place sit up and take notice—The examination was carried out by means of a radio controlled flying model, the property of—put in your name and identification, Joe; we want it on record so that you get the credit and any award that's going—which was adapted by the N.C.O. in question to carry a miniature television transmitter of the type known

as a radio-eye. As a result of this inspection the ship's self-destruction fuse has been identified and a number of photographs taken. It is regretted that these photographs are not of the best quality, since they are taken via the television equipment..."

"But really they're beautiful photographs," Joe protested.

"That's put in to show how innocent, eager and modest we are," Nicholls told him, then continued: "They are being sent by air. I wish to request that the Explosive Section be asked to study them and to recommend a method of making the fuse harmless."

Nicholls was purring like a cat. It amused him to picture the stir this signal would cause at Polar Base. Experts and specialists had tinkered with the problem for months without making any headway and now he, a general duties officer who merely happened to be guarding the ship, had got well on the way to finding a solution.

This message went off, the photographs followed, and Nicholls sat back to enjoy the reactions from H.Q.

The first reaction—if it was a reaction—was totally unex-

pected. It consisted of the arrival, two days later, of a Colonel Hastings. He came in an aircraft accompanied by four N.C.O.'s and a considerable number of large packages. Colonel Hastings made no reference at all to Nicholl's message, but proceeded briskly about his business.

"You're officer in charge here, I take it. I'm Hastings, Technical Intelligence. I've come to make an examination of the alien ship. I'll need a certain amount of co-operation from you."

"Your visit arises out of my message to H.Q. I suppose, Colonel?"

"Your message?" The Colonel looked at him distantly. "My dear fellow, I'm not concerned with administrative matters, and to be blunt with you, I haven't been aware of your existence till this moment."

Nicholls felt suddenly bewildered.

"Sir," he explained, "two days ago I sent a report about my examination of the alien ship. I naturally supposed..."

"You sent a report?" The Colonel was more than slightly contemptuous. "No doubt it's receiving proper attention

somewhere. I'm afraid it hasn't reached me yet, and frankly, I doubt if it will. Our branch receives a great many suggestions —all carefully screened, of course..."

Nicholls' bewilderment began to be replaced by dark suspicions.

"How do you intend to make this examination, Colonel?" he asked. "The proximity fuse..."

The Colonel's frostiness increased, but he offered an explanation.

"I've no special ability for giving non-technical explanations," he snapped, "but briefly I, or rather my department, has developed a remote-control scanning-robot, with which we shall make an examination of the interior of the ship." Colonel Hastings talked in a sharp, hard, confident manner, and his eyes, like two pale blue pebbles, regarded Nicholls without friendliness or humanity. Just when he spoke this last sentence however, his glance shifted away uneasily.

Nicholls swallowed hard, and said nothing more.

"WHAT'S IT all about, Jeff?" Joe asked later when they were alone.

Nicholls regarded the tip of his cigarette and spoke without emotion.

"Our report to H.Q. has been received and understood. The excellent Colonel Hastings has seen a golden chance to get himself a spot of reputation and promotion. Do you know what a remote-control scanning-robot is? It's just another name for Matilda. As soon as Hastings read our report he must have got his Tech. Lab. to knock together another of the same. While H.Q. is still discussing our report he'll make his examination and submit a bigger, louder, more important and more elaborate report, and three months from now, when times and dates have got sufficiently confused, he'll be recognized and accepted as the man who came up with the answer to the gravity fuse. You and I may even be in trouble for being a couple of amateurs whose tinkering might have spoiled everything." Nicholls said all this with a calmness which did not altogether conceal his bitterness.

"Well, the..." Joe proceeded to express his opinion of Colonel Hastings. He also be-

gan to describe what he would do to him.

"Now hold steady, Joe," Nicholls warned. "As a rule I take life as it comes, and act all fatalistic and cynical, but this thing I'm going to fight. Don't let's get ourselves in wrong by being abusive. Let's play it clever."

"OK., O.K.," Joe agreed. "But at least I must see what sort of contraption he's knocked together to do the job. I'll be surprised if it's anything half so good as Matilda."

Joe went out across the desert to the spot where Colonel Hastings' men were rigging up their equipment, and did a bit of snooping around. When he came back to Nicholls' H.Q. tent he was grinning all over his face.

"It's nothing so good as Matilda," he reported. "It's a proper clapped-up job, as might be expected when you consider it's been shoved together in a matter of hours. It's got vertical and horizontal jets instead of rotors, and a ruddy great tele-camera mounted externally. I guess it weighs about four times as much as Matilda."

"But it'll do the job, just the same, won't it?" Nicholls asked. He was feeling extreme-

ly low-spirited about the whole thing now.

"Don't you remember?" Joe reminded him. "Matilda nearly tipped the needle of that fuse right down when she was close. When that hulking great contraption goes inside the ship what d'you suppose will happen?"

"I see!" Nicholls reflected.

"In about one hour from now," Joe prophesied, "that ship will blow itself to pieces. I must get myself right back into a position where I can watch Hastings' face when it happens."

"I must warn him," Nicholls decided, picking up his out-door equipment.

"Don't be a ruddy fool, Jeff," Joe urged. "He double-crossed us, didn't he? Let him alone."

"Very tempting, I agree," Nicholls said. "But there's a war on, and I get a certain amount of pay for helping in my insignificant way to win it. That fact takes priority over any private feud with double-crossing colonels."

"No wonder you're still only a captain of ground-hogs," Joe told him sarcastically. "I'd better come along and take care of you."

Nicholls went out into the sand-hills where Colonel Hastings was supervising the erection of his equipment.

"Sir," he said civilly. "May I have a word with you privately?"

Hastings looked at him warily; Nicholls' expression was neither rebellious nor sullen, merely officially polite.

"Very well, Captain—as briefly as possible, please—you see I'm busy."

"This will only take one moment, sir. You are, of course, quite well aware that I sent a similar robot into the ship a couple of days ago. —May I finish please?—My device was much smaller than yours, and even so it nearly tipped off the gravity fuse. I believe this thing of yours is too large, and that it will actuate the fuse and blow the ship up. That's all, sir."

Hastings' hard pebbly eyes regarded Nicholls for a long moment; clearly he knew quite well what Nicholls was talking about, and it seemed that for an instant or two he considered the warning seriously. But of course it was impossible for such a man to believe that Nicholls could be acting in good faith; to his type of mind

it was immediately clear that this was simply an attempt to delay matters.

"Captain," he snapped. "I haven't the least idea what you're talking about. Except I've a suspicion you're trying to get some personal credit out of this investigation. Be good enough to keep out of my way in future unless you wish me to make an official complaint about you."

He strode purposefully back to his group of N.C.O.'s.

Three-quarters of an hour later the ship blew up.

Several days later Nicholls and Joe watched the undignified departure of Colonel Hastings, hurriedly recalled to North Polar Base, and waited for the storm to break, but the days passed into weeks before a delegation of high-ranking brass arrived. To their utter confusion they found that

the Government were prepared to reward them handsomely for their work in developing Matilda—the General making the speech subtly pointing out that, after all, they *had* been using Government stores for the experiments.

Their photographs taken inside the Jacko ship had produced a great quantity of valuable technical data, which, for the time being, it was thought best to keep secret. Undoubtedly the information in the hands of Earth technicians could well be a turning point in the war against the Jacko mother-fleet sitting out on the edge of the Solar System.

Concerning Colonel Hastings they could learn little except that he had been posted back to earth—as a lecturer at the Space Academy.

THE END

THE HOUSE LORDS

The inhabitants of that planet in Argo Navis were not only human, they were English-speaking, Earth-type humans! But instead of making it easier to get along with them, their culture was the most incomprehensible in the universe—until the explorers returned home!

by JACK VANCE

THE TWO men, with not a word spoken, had become very disturbed. Caffridge, the host, rose to his feet, took quick steps back and forth across the room. He went to the window, looked into the sky, toward the distant star BGD 1169. The guest, Richard Emerson, was affected to an even greater degree. He sat back in his chair, face white, mouth loose,

eyes wide and glistening.

Nothing had been said and there was nothing visible to explain their emotion. They sat in an ordinary suburban living room, notable only for a profusion of curios, oddities and trinkets hanging on the walls.

At a scratching sound, Caffridge turned from the window. He called sharply, "Sarvis!"

The black and white cat,



sharpening its claws on a carved column of exotic wood, laid its ears back, but continued to scratch.

"You rascal!" Caffridge picked up the cat, hustled him outside through the animal's special door. He returned to Emerson. "We seem to be thinking the same thought."

Emerson was gripping the arms of his chair. "How did I miss it before?" he muttered.

"It's a strange business," said Caffridge. "I don't know what we should do."

"It's out of my hands now, thank heaven!" said Emerson.

Caffridge picked up the small white box which contained Emerson's report. "Do you want to come along with me?"

Emerson shook his head. "I've nothing more to say. I don't want to see that again." He nodded toward the box.

"Very well," said Caffridge gloomily. "I'll show this to the Board tonight. After that..."

Emerson smiled, weary and skeptical. "After that, what?"

THE ASTROGRAPHICAL SOCIETY functioned as a nonprofit organization, devoted to extraterrestrial research and exploration. The dues paid in by a million active members were augmented by revenue

from special patents and grants, licenses and counseling fees, with the result that over the years the Society had become very wealthy. A dozen spaceships carried the blue and green Astrographical chevron to remote places; the monthly publication was studied by school children and savants alike; the Astrographical Museum housed a wonderful melange of objects gathered across the universe.

In a specially equipped cupola on the roof of the museum, the Board of Directors met once a month to transact business and to watch and hear vitaliscope reports from research teams. Theodore Caffridge, Chairman of the Board, arriving at the meeting, dropped the box containing Team Commander Richard Emerson's report into the vitaliscope mechanism. He stood silently, a tall somber figure, waiting while conversation around the table died.

"Gentlemen," said Caffridge in a dull monotone, "I have already examined this report. It is the strangest matter of my experience. I am seriously disturbed, and I may remark that Commander Emerson shares my feeling."

He paused. The Directors looked at him curiously.

"Come, Caffridge, don't be mysterious!"

"Let's hear it, Theodore!"

Caffridge smiled the faintest, most remote smile possible. "The report is here; you can see for yourselves."

He touched a switch; the walls of the room dissolved into gray mist; colors swirled and cleared. The Board of Directors became a cluster of invisible eyes and ears in the cabin of the spaceship *Gaea*. Their vantage point was the recording globe at the peak of Emerson's helmet. They saw what he saw, heard what he heard.

Emerson's voice came from a speaker. "We are in orbit over planet Two of star BGD one-one-six-nine, in Argo Navis Four. We were attracted here by a series of pulses radiating in the C-three phase. These would seem to indicate a highly organized technical civilization, so naturally we stopped to investigate."

The images around the walls of the room shifted as Emerson stepped up into the control pit. Through the observation port the Directors could see a world swinging below, in the full light of an invisible sun.

Emerson detailed the physical characteristics of the

world, which resembled those of Earth. "The atmosphere seems breathable; there is vegetation roughly comparable to our own."

Emerson approached the telescreen; again the images around the walls shifted. "The signals had led us to expect some sort of intelligent occupancy. We were not disappointed. The autochthons live, not in organized settlements, but in isolated dwellings. For lack of a better word, we've been calling them palaces." Emerson adjusted a dial on the console; the view on the telescreen expanded enormously and the Directors were looking into a forest as dense as a jungle. The view shifted across the treetops to a clearing about a mile in diameter. The "palace" occupied the center of the clearing —a dozen tall walls, steep and high as cliffs, joined apparently at random. They were constructed of some shimmering metalloid substance, and open to the sky. No portals or apertures were visible.

"That's about all the detail I can pick up from this altitude," came Emerson's voice. "Notice the absence of roof, the apparent lack of interior furnishing. It hardly seems a dwelling. Notice also how the

clearing is landscaped—like a formal garden."

He backed away from the telescreen; the Directors once more sat in the cabin of the *Gaea*. "We have been broadcasting international symbols in all bands," said Emerson. "So far there has been no response. I think that we will set down in that clearing. There is an element of risk attached, but I believe that a race apparently so sophisticated will neither be surprised nor shocked by the appearance of a strange spaceship."

THE *GAEA* settled into the atmosphere of BGD 1169-2, and the hull shivered to the slur of the thin gas whipping past.

Emerson spoke into the vitaliscope pickup, noting that the ship hovered above the area previously observed and was about to land.

The bumpers struck solid ground. There was a momentary fluctuation as the automatic stabilizers took hold; then a sense of anchorage. Automatic switches cut off impulsion; the half-heard whine died down the scale into silence. The crew stood at the observation posts, staring out over the clearing.

At the center rose the palace—tall planes of glistening metalloid. Even from this close view, no openings, no windows, no doors or vents could be seen.

The grounds surrounding the palace were carefully tended. Avenues of white-trunked trees held square black leaves, large as trays, turned up to the sun. There were irregular beds of black moss, feathery maroon ferns, fluffy pink and white growths like cotton candy. In the background rose the forest; a tangle of blue-green trees and broad-leaved shrubs, red, black, gray, and yellow.

Inside the *Gaea* the crew stood by the ports, ready to depart at any sign of hostility.

The palace remained quiet.

Half an hour passed. A small shape appeared briefly outside the wall of the palace. Cope, the young third officer, saw it first and called to Emerson. "Look there!"

Emerson focused the telescopic bull's-eye. "It's a child—a *human* child!"

The crew came to stare. Intelligent life among the stars was a rarity; to find such life in the human mold was cause for astonishment.

Emerson increased the magnification of the telescopic

pane. "It's a boy, about seven or eight," he said. "He's looking at us, but he doesn't seem particularly interested."

The child turned back to the palace, and disappeared. Emerson uttered a soft ejaculation. "Did you see that?"

"What happened?" asked Wilhelm, the big blond second officer.

"He walked through the wall! As if it were air!"

Time passed; there was no further show of life. The crew fidgeted. "Why don't they show some interest?" complained Swett, the steward. "Even the kids walk away."

Emerson shook his head in puzzlement. "Spaceships certainly don't drop down every day."

Wilhelm suddenly called out, "There's more of them—two, three, six—a whole confounded tribe!"

THHEY CAME from the forest, quietly, almost stealthily, singly and in pairs, men and women, until a dozen stood near the ship. They wore smocks woven of coarse fiber, crude leather shoes with flaring tops. At their belts hung daggers of several sizes and complicated little devices built of wood and twisted gut. They

were a hard-bitten lot, with heavy-boned faces and glinting eyes. They walked with a careful bend to the knee, which gave them a furtive aspect. They kept the ship between themselves and the palace at all times, as if anxious to escape observation.

Emerson said, "I can't understand it. These aren't just humanoid types; they're human in every respect!" He looked across to where Boyd, the biologist, was finishing his final tests. "What's the story?"

"Clean bill of health," said Boyd. "No dangerous pollen, no air-borne proteides, nothing remarkable in any way."

"I'm going to step outside," said Emerson.

Wilhelm protested, "They look untrustworthy and they're armed."

"I'll take a chance," said Emerson. "If they were hostile, I don't think they'd expose themselves."

Wilhelm was not convinced. "You never can tell what a strange race has in mind."

"Nevertheless," said Emerson, "I'm going out. You fellows cover me from the gun blisters. Also stand by the engines, in case we want to leave in a hurry."

"Are you going out alone?" Wilhelm asked dubiously.

"There's no point risking two lives."

Wilhelm's square raw-bones face took on a mulish set. "I'll go out with you. Two eyes see better than one."

Emerson laughed. "I've already got two eyes. Besides, you're second in command; your place is here in the ship."

Cope, the young third officer, slender and dark, hardly out of his teens, spoke. "I'd like to go out with you."

"Very well, Cope," said Emerson. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later the two men stepped out of the ship, descended the ramp, stood on the soil of BGD 1169-2. The men and women from the forest still stood behind the ship, peering from time to time toward the palace. When Emerson and Cope appeared, they drew together, ready for either attack, defense or flight. Two of them fingered the wooden contrivances at their belts, which Emerson saw to be dart catapults. But otherwise there was no motion, friendly or otherwise.

The spacemen halted twenty feet distant. Emerson raised his hand, smiled in what he

hoped to be a friendly manner. "Hello."

They stared at him, then began muttering among themselves. Emerson and Cope moved a step or two closer; the voices became audible. A lank, gray-haired man, who seemed to wield a degree of authority, spoke with peevish energy, as if refuting nonsense. "No, no—impossible for them to be Freemen!"

The gnarled, beady-eyed man to whom he spoke retorted, "Impossible? What do you take them for, then, if not Freemen?"

Emerson and Cope stared in amazement. These men spoke English!

Someone else remarked, "They're not House Lords! Who ever saw House Lords like these!"

A fourth voice was equally definite. "And it's a certainty that they're not servants."

"All of you talk in circles," snapped one of the women. "Why don't you ask them and be done with it?"

English! The accent was blurred, the intonation unusual, but the language, nonetheless, was their own! Emerson and Cope came a step closer; the forest people fell silent, and shifted their feet nervously.

Emerson spoke. "I am Robert Emerson," he said. "This is Howard Cope. Who are you people?"

The gray-haired chief surveyed them with crafty impudence. "Who are we? We're Freemen, as you must know very well. What do you here? What House are you from?"

Emerson said, "We're from Earth."

"Earth?"

Emerson looked around the blank faces. "You don't know of Earth?"

"No."

"But you speak an Earth language!"

The chief grinned. "How else can men speak?"

Emerson laughed weakly. "There are a number of other languages."

The chief shook his head skeptically. "I can't believe that."

Emerson and Cope exchanged glances of bewildered amusement. "Who lives in the palace?" Emerson asked.

The chief seemed incredulous at Emerson's ignorance. "The House Lords, naturally. Genarro, Hesphor and the rest."

Emerson considered the tall walls, which seemed, on the whole, ill-adapted to human re-

quirements. "They are men, like ourselves?"

The chief laughed jeeringly. "If you would call such luxurious creatures men! We tolerate them only for their females." From the men of the group came a lascivious murmur. "The soft, sweet House Lord girls!"

The forest women hissed in anger. "They're as worthless as the men!" exclaimed one leathery old creature.

There was a sudden nervous motion at the outskirts of the group. "Here they come! The House Lords!"

Quickly, with long, bent-kneed strides, the savages retreated, and were gone into the forest.

EMERSON and Cope walked around the ship. Crossing the clearing in leisurely fashion were a young man, a young woman, a girl and the boy they had seen before. They were the most handsome beings the Earthmen had ever seen. The young man wore a skintight garment of emerald-green sequins, a complicated headdress of silver spines; the boy wore red trousers, a dark blue jacket and a long-billed blue cap. The young woman and the girl wore simple sheaths of white and blue, stretching with easy

elasticity as they walked. They were bareheaded and their pale hair fell flowing to their shoulders.

They halted a few yards from the ship, considered the spacemen with sober curiosity. Their expressions were identical; intent, intelligent, with a vague underlying hauteur. The young man glanced casually toward the forest, held up a small rod. A puff of darkness came forth and a black bubble wafted toward the forest, expanding enormously as it went.

From the forest came yelps of fear, the stumble of racing feet. The black bubble exploded among the trees, scattering hundreds of smaller black bubbles, which grew and exploded in their turn.

The sound of flight diminished in the distance. The four young House Lords, smiling a little, returned their attention to Emerson and Cope.

"And who may you be? Surely not Wild Men?"

"No, we're not Wild Men," said Emerson.

The boy said, "But you're not House Lords."

"And certainly you're not servants," said the girl, who was several years older than the boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen.

Emerson explained patiently, "We are astrographers, scientists, from Earth."

Like the forest people, the House Lords were puzzled. "Earth?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Emerson. "Surely you know of Earth!"

They shook their heads.

"But you're human beings—Earth people!"

"No," said the young man, "We are House Lords. 'Earth' is nothing to us."

"But you speak our language—an Earth language!"

They shrugged and smiled. "There are a hundred ways in which your people might have learned our speech."

The matter seemed to interest them very little. The young woman looked toward the forest. "Best be careful of the Wild Men; they'll do you harm if they can." She turned. "Come, let us go back."

"Wait!" cried Emerson.

They observed him with austere politeness. "Yes?"

"Aren't you curious about us, or interested in where we came from?"

The young man smilingly shook his head, and the silver spines of his headgear chimed like bells. "Why should we be interested?"

Emerson laughed in mingled astonishment and irritation. "We're strangers from space—from Earth, which you claim you never heard of."

"Exactly. If we have never heard of you, how can we be interested?"

Emerson threw up his hands. "Suit yourself. However, we're interested in you."

The young man nodded, accepting this as a matter of course. The boy and girl were already walking away; the young woman had half-turned and was waiting. "Come, Hesphor," she called softly.

"I'd like to talk to you," Emerson said. "There's a mystery here—something we should straighten out."

"No mystery. We are House Lords, and this our House."

"May we come into your house?"

The young man hesitated, glanced at the young woman. She pursed her lips, shook her head. "Lord Genarro."

The young man made a small grimace. "The servants are gone; Genarro sleeps. They may come for a short time."

The young woman shrugged. "If Genarro wakes, he will not be pleased."

"Ah, but Genarro—"

"But Genarro," the woman

interrupted quickly, "is the First Lord of the House!"

Hesphor seemed momentarily sulky. "Genarro sleeps, and the servants are gone. These wild things may enter."

He signaled to Cope and Emerson. "Come."

THE HOUSE Lords strolled back through the garden, talking quietly together. Emerson and Cope followed, half angry, half sheepish. "This is fantastic," Emerson muttered. "Snubbed by the aristocracy half an hour after we arrive."

"I guess we'll have to put up with it," said Cope. "They know things we've never even thought of. That black bubble, for instance."

The boy and girl reached the wall of the palace. Without hesitation they walked through the glistening surface. The young man and woman followed. When Emerson and Cope reached the wall, it was solid, supernormally cold. They felt along the smooth surface, pushing, groping in exasperation.

The boy came back through the wall. "Are you coming in?"

"We'd like to," said Emerson.

"That's solid there." The boy watched them in amuse-

ment. "Can't you tell where it's permeable?"

"No," said Emerson.

"Neither can the Wild Men," said the boy. He pointed. "Go through there."

Emerson and Cope passed through, and the wall felt like a thin film of cool water.

They stood on a dull blue floor, with silver filaments tracing a looped pattern. The walls rose high all around them. A hundred feet above, bars of black substance protruded from shallow ledges, and the air around the tips seemed to quiver, like the air over a hot road.

There was no furniture in the room, no trace of human habitation.

"Come," said the boy. He crossed the room, walked through the wall opposite. Emerson and Cope followed. "I hope we can find our way out," said Cope. "I wouldn't want to climb these walls."

They stood in a hall similar to the first, but with a floor of resilient white stuff. Their bodies felt light, their steps took them farther than they expected. The young man and woman were waiting for them. The boy had stepped back through the wall; the girl was nowhere in sight.

"We can stay with you a moment or two," said the young man. "Our servants are gone; the house is quiet. Perhaps you'd care to eat?" Without waiting for response he reached forward. His hands disappeared into nowhere. He drew them back, pulling forth a rack supporting trays and bowls of foodstuffs—wedges of red jelly, tall white cones, black wafers, small green globular fruits, flagons containing liquids of various colors.

"You may eat," said the young woman, motioning with her hand.

"Thank you," said Emerson. He and Cope gingerly sampled the food. It was strange and rich, and tingled in the mouth like carbonated water.

"Where does this food come from?" asked Emerson. "How can you pull it out of the air like that?"

The young House Lord looked at his hands. "The servants put it there."

"Where do the servants get it?"

The young man shrugged. "Why should we trouble ourselves, as long as it's there?"

Cope asked quizzically, "What would you do if your servants left you?"

"Such a thing could never happen."

"I'd like to see your servants," said Emerson.

"They're not here now." The young man removed his head-gear, tucked it into an invisible niche. "Tell us about this 'Earth' of yours."

"It's a planet like this one," said Emerson, "although men and women live much differently."

"Do you have servants?"

"None of us have servants now."

"Mmph," said the young woman in scorn. "Like the Wild Men."

Cope asked, "How long have you lived here?"

The question seemed to puzzle the House Lords. "How long? What do you mean?"

"How many years."

"What is a 'year'?"

"A unit of time—the interval a planet takes to make a revolution around its sun. Just as a day is the time a planet takes to rotate on its axis."

The House Lords were amused. "That's a queer thought...magnificently arbitrary. What possible use is such an idea?"

Emerson said drily. "We find time measurements useful."

The House Lords smiled at each other. "That well may be," Hesphor remarked.

"Who are the Wild Men?" asked Cope.

"Just riffraff," said the young woman with a shudder. "Outcasts from Houses where there was no room."

"They harass us; they try to steal our women," said the young man. He held up his hand. "Listen." He and the young woman looked at each other.

Emerson and Cope could hear nothing.

"Lord Genarro," said the young woman. "He comes."

Hesphor looked uneasily at the wall, glanced at Emerson and Cope, then planted himself obstinately in the middle of the hall.

THREE was a slight sound. A tall man dressed in shining black strode through the wall. His hair was copper-gold, his eyes frost-blue. He saw Emerson and Cope; he took a great stride forward. "What are these wild things doing here! Are you all mad? Out, out with them!"

Hesphor interposed. "They are strangers from another world. They mean no harm."

"Out with them! Eating our

food! Ogling the Lady Faelm!" He advanced menacingly; Emerson and Cope stepped back. "Wild things, go!"

"Just as you like," said Emerson. "Show us the way out."

"One moment!" said Hesphor. "I invited them here; they are my charges."

Genarro turned his displeasure against the young House Lord. "Do you wish to join the Wild Men?"

Hesphor stared at him; their eyes locked. Hesphor wilted and turned away.

"Very well," he muttered. "They shall leave." He whistled; through the wall came the boy. "Take the strangers to their ship."

"Quickly!" roared Genarro. "The air reeks; they are covered with filth!"

"This way!" The boy scampered through the wall; Emerson and Cope followed with alacrity.

Through two walls they passed and once more stood in the open air. Cope heaved a deep sigh. "Genarro's hospitality leaves much to be desired."

The girl came out of the palace and joined the boy.

"Come," said the boy. "We'll take you to your ship. You'd

best be away before the servants return."

Emerson looked back toward the palace, shrugged. "Let's go."

They followed the boy and girl through the formal garden, past the white-trunked trees, the beds of black moss, the pink and white candy floss. The *Gaea*, at the far end of the clearing, seemed familiar and homelike; Emerson and Cope hurried their steps.

They passed a clump of gray-stalked bamboo; there was a rustle of movement, a quick rush and they were surrounded by Wild Men. Hands gripped Emerson and Cope, their weapons were snatched.

The boy and girl, struggling, kicking, screaming, were seized; nooses were dropped around their bodies and they were tugged toward the jungle.

"Loose us!" yel'ed the boy. "The servants will pulverize you."

"The servants are gone," cried the wild chief happily. "And I've got what I've wanted for many years—a fresh, beautiful House Lord girl."

The girl sobbed and screamed and tore at her bonds; the boy struggled and kicked. "Easy, boy," the chief warned. "We're close enough to

cutting your throat as it is."

"Why are you taking us?" panted Emerson. "We're no good to you."

"Only in what your friends will give to have you back." The chief grinned knowingly over his shoulder. "Weapons, good cloth, good shoes."

"We don't carry such things with us!"

"You'll wait till we get them!"

The forest was only fifty yards away. The boy flung himself flat on the ground, the girl did likewise. Emerson felt the grasp on his arms relax; he broke loose, swinging his fists. He struck a Wild Man, who fell to the ground. The chief snatched out his catapult, aimed it. "One move and you're dead!"

Emerson stood rigid. The Wild Men seized the boy and girl; the party moved ahead.

But now the raid had been noticed at the palace; the air pulsed to a weird high whistle. The Wild Men increased their pace.

From the palace came a fan of black, shearing down like a great black vane, striking the ground at the forest's edge.

TH E WILD Men stopped short. Escape was blocked at this point. They turned, ran

parallel to the edge of the clearing.

Out of the palace came Genarro and Hesphor, and behind them, Faelm and another woman. Across the clearing came the sound of Genarro's voice, full of passion and threat.

Emerson and Cope ran like men in a nightmare. The *Gaea* loomed before them; they pounded up the ramp, plunged into the hull.

The crew, white-faced and anxious, had been waiting; there was not a second's delay. The door slid shut, power roared through the tubes and the *Gaea* rose from the clearing.

The *Gaea* was in space, far from any star.

Without comment he set a course for Earth.

TH E VITALISCOPE images vanished. The Directors of the Astrographical Society sat stiff in their seats.

Theodore Caffridge spoke. His voice sounded flat and prosaic.

"As you have seen, Commander Emerson and crew underwent a most peculiar experience."

"Peculiar!" Ben Haynault whistled. "That's an understatement if there ever was one!"

"But what does it mean?" demanded Pritchard. "Those people speaking English!"

"And knowing nothing of Earth!"

Caffridge said in his flat voice, "Emerson and I have formed a tentative hypothesis. Chronologically, what happened was this. Like you, we were mystified. Who were these House Lords? How could they speak an Earth language, but still know nothing of Earth? How did the House Lords control their servants, these tremendous creatures which could be seen only as flickers of light and shadow?"

Caffridge paused. No one spoke; he went on. "Commander Emerson had no answer to these questions. Neither did I.

"Then something very ordinary occurred, an event quite insignificant in itself. But it set off a charge in both our minds.

"What happened was that my cat Sarvis came into the house. He used his special little swinging door. My small House Lord, Sarvis. He came into his palace, he went to his dish and looked for his dinner."

There was frozen silence in the Board room, the arrestment

in time which comes of surprise and shock.

Then someone coughed; there was the hiss of breath, a bit of nervous laughter, general uneasy motion.

"Theodore," Ben Haynault asked in a husky voice, "what are you implying?"

"I've given you the facts. You must draw your own inferences."

Paul Pritchard muttered, "A hoax, surely. There's no other explanation. A society of crackpots...escapists..."

Caffridge smiled. "You might discuss that theory with Emerson."

Pritchard fell silent.

"Emerson considers himself lucky," Caffridge went on reflectively. "I'm inclined to agree. If some wild thing came into my house and killed Sarvis, I'd consider it a domestic tragedy of the highest order. I might not have been quite so forbearing."

"What can we do?" asked Haynault quietly.

Caffridge went to the window and stood looking up into the southern sky. "We can hope that they have all the House Lords they want. Otherwise—none of us are safe..."

TINY ALLY

by HARLAN ELLISON

They didn't meet an "abominable snowman" up there in the Himalayas—they met something entirely different that they dared not talk about.



WHEN WE saw him first, he came stumbling across the snow, almost beneath our feet. For a moment I thought it was a snow-swirl, or a shadow. At 18,000 feet, that happens often.

Deszlow stopped and cupped his hands to his mouth, having pulled up his oxygen mask, and

screamed to the rest of us on the line. "For God's sake! Come here and see this!"

His voice was almost lost in the scream of the wind, but we pulled along the rope to see what he had discovered. Rutledge and Ferraday and I slid back down the slope, digging our crampons into the tightly-packed crust, leaving spike-marks in jagged rows. We clustered around Deszlow, the wind of the summit picking at us icily. We stared with great confusion at the tiny mountain-climber Deszlow had discovered.

Note this: at 500 yards short of the 18,000 foot mark on Annapurna—we were following in the tracks of the French expedition that had de-

feated the peak—on a geo-physical survey, we discovered a minuscule climber. He was no more than six inches high, with a tightly belted *anorak* jacket, a pike, crampons of a tiny form, and a face quite red from exertion. I did not realize it then, but there were even *more* physically startling things about him. But one



thing *did* shock me:

He had a knife in the small, small, *small* of his back.

A chill that was deeper and sharper than the chill of the wind—roaring down from the unseen peaks above—took my spine. Even as I stood staring at the tiny panting figure, Ferraday's abrupt action penetrated my frozen consciousness. As it did, I yelled hoarsely through my mask, "No, you fool! Don't—"

But already it was too late. Ferraday had picked up the tiny man, was holding him tightly by the collar of his jacket, and was reaching for the knife with his free hand. I still cannot tell how I knew, but I was suddenly *absolutely* certain that it was the *worst* thing Ferraday could do. Slipping and staggering on the treacherous surface, I rushed forward. Blindly, I plunged into Ferraday, arms outthrust to stop his action.

There was a brilliant, blinding flash, that sprayed the snow with blood-red shadows.

I felt myself lifted, hurled, smashed to the ground. From the edge of my vision I saw Ferraday also being lifted, and thrown down the mountain. I don't know what snapped the

rope... perhaps it was the cutting edge of my pike that ripped it through as Ferraday went past... but I thank God he did not drag the rest of us with him.

Even as Ferraday crashed face-first into the ice, I heard the bellow of the black-bearded Austrian. Ferraday disappeared down the slope, the rope waving behind, the snow billowing out from him in a fine wedge of white. His scream was muffled and buried beneath tons of ice and snow, as he helplessly plunged across a snow-bridge. The bridge collapsed, and he plummeted three thousand feet to a rocky fault.

Deszlow and Rutledge stood transfixed, their pikes held at queer angles, their faces—beneath the beards, glare-glasses and masks—whiter than normal. Their eyes were large, and I was certain their mouths were open in horror.

I dragged myself stiffly to elbows and knees, spat a mouthful of blood and snow across the ice-pack, and tottered erect.

"The little man was gone, naturally.

I sagged back against my pike, leaning, breathing, drawing breath from a suddenly in-

sufficient supply. "Ferra... Ferraday... He—he's gone?"

Deszlow's huge square head bobbed confirmation, and Rutledge stared off across the jaggedly split snow-bridge, where a gaping, sliding crevice still poured snow atop the mangled-body of our companion—three thousand feet below. "We'd—we'd better go," Deszlow gasped. "The wind is rising. The *massif* will be hell in an hour."

We started out again, up the face of Annapurna, suddenly frightened of this expedition. We had known that death climbed with us, but not this way...not with this shroud of strangeness that hung over us.

Who...or what...had the little man been?

In the next hour Deszlow's words came true. The *massif*. It was a hell; but not of the kind we had imagined.

UNQUESTIONABLY, it had been the presence of the little man—whose tracks we observed coming down, as we climbed steadily up—which sharpened our senses enough to see it.

We had climbed for the hour, hoping to find a sheltering ledge before the storm broke on the mountain, and

were just passing a series of small caves, ripped in the face of the slope, when Rutledge dragged on the line signalling.

We stopped, and looked where he had pointed.

There are no words colorful enough to explain or vocalize our feelings of mixed wonder and terror at what he had seen, to which he now pointed.

Wedged in the rocks, shoved into one of the smaller caves, was a bright, shining sliver of metal, perhaps ten feet long; no question arose in our minds...the shape was totally familiar, from popularizations in newspapers and magazines. It was a spaceship.

There, 18,000 feet up on one of the highest mountains on Earth, we had uncovered a spaceship. We had no more than a moment to stare, for as we advanced toward it, sliding across one roll of the slope, a port opened, and a group of four figures, identical to the little man we had seen before, emerged.

They carried weapons. The equipment was so small, and so intricate, we got only a brief glimpse of delicate machine-work and involved mechanisms, before they opened fire on us. Had we been unpre-

pared, had we not been set alert by the presence of the first little man, we would have been dead at once.

But even as the same blood-red shadows illuminated the snow, and the beams of raw energy spat from their rifles, we were leaping aside. I jumped forward and to the right, clawing in the snow with hands and feet for some purchase. I caught a breath of one beam over my left shoulder, and behind me heard Rutledge scream as it tore across his face.

Then I felt a tug on the line, and knew he was down, most probably dead—how I knew I can never say. But the drag was there. I was hauling a dead man behind me. But there was not a second to stop to think about it; with a fanatical fury I struggled to my knees, and brought my pike up over my head.

Deszlow was to my left, cowering in the snow as the bolts of energy smashed over him.

I brought down the pike. It flattened two of the little men at once, and the other three ran slippingly back to the ship.

I screamed something—I

have no idea what—at Deszlow, and he flopped forward, grabbed at one end of the ship . . . and with a superhuman strength I had not thought the slim man capable of, wrenched the ship free of the cave.

I struggled forward again, and grasped the other end. I could see jet tubes of some strange sort, protruding from the rear, and from within I heard the beginning of what must have been a generator whine.

Together we lifted the ship, bumbled erect, and with a monstrous effort *threw* the ship as hard as we could, down the side of the mountain.

They tried to get the engines started, for we saw a blast of flame leap from the rear of the ship, but in a second it went out as the ship struck an outcropping of rock, and twisted grotesquely. Their drive was useless, and, as we stared wildly, the ship bounced and crashed and careened down the slope. Before it plunged into the snow-mists ten thousand feet below, we saw the little sliver of metal shine much more brightly, and then with a flash and a roar, erupt into a sheet of flame and a scatter of metal and flesh.

SOMEHOW, we got down, carrying Rutledge's body. His face was entirely gone, charred completely off. We never found enough of the ship to reconstruct even a small portion of it.

To this day we do not know what they were there for. Whether they were invaders from another planet, or just visitors, or what...is something we will never know. But we know this: the little man who first accosted us, had been trying to warn us away, had been trying to get to us to tell us about his ship and his companions. And if they were *not* malevolent, if they were *not* here to try conquest of some sort, why had they knifed him? Why did they destroy

him when he was so close to speaking to us? Why did they fire upon us?

I don't think we'll ever know the answers to those questions, but I know this: whoever he was, and for whatever reasons motivated him, that little man with the knife in his back was the truest ally Man or Earth has ever known.

I don't suppose it will outlast the first real slide or storm up there, but Deszlow and I *had* to climb back up to the 18,000 foot mark later.

We don't think anyone will ever know what happened up there, or ever see it, but we *had* to put up a cross for that tiniest of allies.

THE END

STRUCTURAL DEFECT

by Robert F. Young

Looking for a bluebird in that perfectly laid-out utopian suburb was not always quite as easy as the blueprints had provided—in fact it was rather the reverse!

Sparrows had moved into the bluebird house again, and this time Melray really was annoyed. Everything else in the bright little garden managed to perform its intended function efficiently enough: the fountain twinkled with just the right iridescence in the summer morning sunlight, the petunias grew neatly along the precise pebbled paths, the rose vines made pleasant arabesques on their pink trellises....

The only recalcitrant was the bluebird house. It simply refused to attract bluebirds.

Melray looked over the white plastic fence into Mr. Grover's garden. It was a facsimile of his own, of course (Standard Suburban, Fountain Included), as were all the others in the block. His eyes sought the slender white pole

with the little rustic house on top, and concentrated on the tiny orifice of the door in search of a wisp of blue. As he watched, an arrogant sparrow came out and perched on the diminutive front porch as though it owned the whole world. After surveying its domain for a moment, it made a brief flight to Mr. Grover's catalpa tree where it disappeared among the ovate leaves and the crooked branches.

Melray concluded then that all the bluebird houses in the block had sparrows living in them. Perhaps even in the whole city. It was a perfectly logical conclusion in view of the fact that the houses were mass-produced: if a structural defect appeared in one or two, it would inevitably be repeated in all the others. Mass pro-

duction *did* have some disadvantages. But of course when you considered all of its advantages, the disadvantages were rather inconsequential.

Sparrows, for instance, weren't much of a hardship. They were a dirty gray to be sure, instead of a bright blue; but outside of that there was very little difference between them and the house's intended occupants.

Just the same, though, it would be nice to have a bluebird in the garden for a change.

He wondered if you could buy domestic ones....

"DID YOU have a nice Walk in the Garden, dear?" Barbara asked.

"Fine," Melray said, sitting down at the breakfast shelf. "Except for one thing. There's—"

"The poached eggs are done!" the stove said.

"Time to butter the toast!" announced the toaster.

"Yes, dear?"

"I was going to say," Melray said, "that there's another family of—"

"Turn me on! Turn me on!" cried the Reassurer. "You don't want to miss the Happy Philosopher do you?"

Barbara pressed the little

blue button and sat down. "A family of what, dear?"

"A family of—"

"Good morning!" the Happy Philosopher said. "And what a fine bright (0831) summer morning it is! Flowers blooming and birds singing. Happy people sitting down everywhere to delicious poached eggs on toast and exquisite Barkam's coffee!

"The daily prognosis? You lucky people, you! The prognosis for today is perfect! (0832). The Office of Statistical Extrapolation anticipates a minimum of accidents, no deaths—"

"Don't people ever die any more?" Melray asked loudly.

"Darling, don't say such things!"

"—speaking of the low death rate, did you know that the Longevity Level has risen to 104.6? That's right! Isn't that simply wonderful, folks?

"Well, folks, just one more day and another glorious weekend will be on hand. Don't forget, all you lucky people with red cars—this is Red Car Sunday coming up. It's going to be *your* turn to use the highways! It's been an astonishingly short week, hasn't it! And filled with happiness and contentment and well-being; boun-

teous (0833) leisure and fine, oh *superbly* fine, anamorphic entertainment. How do you like the new family hour? The Smiths. Really nice people to welcome into your living rooms, aren't they? You *bet* they are!"

"The trouble is," Melray said, "they come in whether they're welcome or not."

"Don't *talk* that way!" Barbara said. "If people hear you they'll think you're unhappy."

"Maybe I am." He reached up and turned off the Reassurer. "We've got sparrows in our bluebird house again!"

"Not again!"

"Yes, again. Grover's got them in his, too. Must have been a bad batch of houses."

"Why that's a shame!" Barbara said, "We paid perfectly good credits for that house. It could at least attract *one* bluebird."

"I've been thinking," Melray said. "Maybe we could buy one, a tame one of course. One that wouldn't fly away. It would brighten up the garden a lot."

"Why don't you try, dear?"

"There's a bird store near the factory. I'll stop off on my way to work and see what they've got." He stood up.

"Time for the bus, Babs. Got to go."

She came round the shelf and kissed him. "Why don't you drop over to Birth Administration during your lunch hour," she said shyly to his lapel. "Maybe they didn't get our application at all. Or maybe they lost it. We should have heard by now."

He smiled softly into her chestnut hair. "All right, Babs, I'll check on it. But I think they got it all right. The waiting period might be longer than we figured.... See you, Baby."

"Bye, Darling."

MELRAY had never seen so many birds. There were red ones and yellow ones and green ones and multicolored ones; big ones and little ones, quiet ones and noisy ones; caged ones, chained ones, some perched on little trapezes, some fluttering about the shop.

The little gray-haired proprietor approached him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm looking for a bluebird," Melray said.

The man gave him an odd stare. "You know, it's the strangest thing, sir," he said. "You're the fifth person to come in here this morning looking for a bluebird. Why, you're

at least the hundredth one this week!"

"Do you have them in stock?"

"I have cockatoos and parakeets and lorries and lovebirds—practically every kind of domestic bird in existence. I have a splendid pair of Martian *palavavavas* if you're interested in extraterrestrial—"

"But bluebirds. Do you have bluebirds?"

"You see, sir, bluebirds aren't a domestic species. Even if I wanted to carry them I wouldn't be able to get them. Now I have a singularly fine pair of Venusian *arises*—"

"Then you don't have bluebirds at all?" Melray tried to conceal his disappointment.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid not. But you might try The Bird House on Center Boulevard. They *might* carry them. But I doubt it very much."

"Thanks," Melray said. "Maybe I'll stop there on my way home...."

"YOUR APPLICATION is on file, sir," the thin faced girl behind the window said. "You'll just have to wait till it comes up for approval."

"But can't you give me some idea how long it will take?" Melray asked.

"Issuance of Maternity Licenses is contingent upon the death rate. Surely you're aware of that, sir. *Surely* you attend Citizen Class regularly!"

"Oh yes. Of course," Melray said. "But I thought—"

"Your application will come up for approval in due course. Definitely within the next ten years. You may be confident of that. Was there anything else you wanted to know, sir?"

Melray stepped back from the window, bumping against the first man in the long line of men behind him. He felt numb. "No, that's all," he heard himself say. "Thanks."

Center Boulevard was a wide straight river with white high banks of buildings. It was filled now with glaring afternoon sunlight and homeward-hurrying people. Melray left the airbus a block from The Bird House. He felt like stretching his legs a little, soaking up some summer sun. Airbuses were fine—you couldn't ask for better transportation—but they *were* crowded sometimes, and very little of the bright fresh air they traveled through ever penetrated as far as their interiors.

There was a long queue of people lining the dazzling

cades. Melray walked past them, wondering what new deepie had opened, wondering why *any* deepie would open at such an unconventional hour. There was no kaleidoscopic marquee at the end of the queue, however. When he reached the end of the queue he discovered an ordinary store front with an ordinary sign over it that said, *The Bird House*. Beneath the sign a flustered little man was standing, waving his arms and shouting. "Go away, go away!" he was shouting. "I tell you I haven't got any bluebirds. I haven't got any!"

IT WAS nice to have a retentive memory; to be able to recall an obscure little store on an obscure little side street that you'd visited only once, and quite a long time ago at that. Melray was rather pleased with himself when he left the airbus at Center 6-41. He was even more pleased with himself when he turned down the side street and discovered—as he'd expected to, of course—that there was no queue of people lined up before The Aviary.

Barbara was going to be upset when he didn't show up for dinner on time, but it couldn't be helped. She'd have trouble

keeping the—let's see, it was Thursday, so it would be braised beef—warm for him. But he'd been looking for a bluebird practically all day, and somehow he hated to go home without one. Besides, a bluebird might take her mind off what he had to tell her about the application....

Apparently, everybody in the city was looking for bluebirds. All of the bluebird houses produced within the last few years must have been defective; there was no other way to account for a common bird species having become so much in demand virtually overnight.

Well, Melray thought, finding bluebirds was like finding anything else. You simply had to know where to look for them.

He turned into the sunken entrance of the little shop. There was a big sign on the door. *We Do Not Have Bluebirds*, the sign said.

EVEN WITH the anamorphic images of The Smiths crowding into it, the living room seemed strangely empty. Barbara had scarcely spoken at all since he'd explained to her about the application. A peculiar look had come into her eyes, a sort of glazed, empty

look, and she hadn't even seemed to hear him when he'd told her about the dearth of bluebirds.

She sat now staring at Little Timmie Smith with a kind of mesmeric fascination. Little Timmie Smith was jumping gleefully up and down on the Smith's davenport which obtruded itself (anamorphically) right out of the life-size aspect screen and into the living room. He was so close and so real that you would have felt that you could have reached right out and touched his pink, roly-poly, little boy's body if you hadn't known before hand that all you would really touch would be thin air.

Mr. Smith was sitting in his big comfortable chair (part of that stuck out of the screen too), discussing the comfy, trivial matters of everyday living with Mrs. Smith, who sat comfortably on the davenport (complacently tolerant of Little Timmie's ecstatic trampling), crocheting antimacassars.

"You know, Mother," Mr. Smith was saying, "this is a pretty fine little old world we live in. Whenever people want something all they have to do is say so, and bingo! right away they can buy it!"

"It's a great little old world

all right," Mrs. Smith said.

Mr. Smith lit his pipe. He leaned forward in his comfortable chair. "Yessir," he said. "Why, look what everybody's got already!" He began to enumerate on his fingers: "A swell new car, a fine new garage to keep it in, a beautiful new modern house with all the latest conveniences, a pleasant garden to relax in, an anamorphic set— Why, I could go on forever, Mother!"

"Watch me *jump!*" Little Timmie shouted.

"We're pretty lucky people all right," Mrs. Smith said. "Be careful, Timmie!"

"Well I guess we *are!*" Mr. Smith said. He blew a big cloud of smoke. "And now, do you know what, Mother? Lots of people are looking for domestic bluebirds. That's right. Bluebirds. It seems a bad shipment of bluebird houses got distributed by mistake. A pretty bad shipment, I understand. And bluebirds, being pretty persnickety critters, just won't come around and live in them." He blew an even bigger cloud of smoke. "Can you beat that, Mother?"

"Well I declare!" Mrs. Smith said.

"Yessir. And that's why I say that this is a pretty fine

little old world, because do you know what, Mother? Some fine big company heard about this sudden demand for bluebirds and they went way out of their way to get some. Just so all those dissatisfied people could be happy. Now isn't that something, Mother?"

Mrs. Smith shook her head in reverant admiration. She cluck-clucked. "Well I guess so!" she said. "I think it's simply marvelous!"

"You just *bet* it's marvelous!" Mr. Smith shifted around in his comfortable chair so that he faced the Melray living room, and every other living room in the city. "Now this fine big company is making bluebird deliveries this very night to every aviary, every department store, and every credit store in the city. Now all you dissatisfied folks have got to do," he said, looking Melray straight in the eye and pointing stabbingly with his pipe, "is step into one of those stores tomorrow morning and there'll be a bluebird ready for you, just waiting for you to buy it and take it home. How's that for service, folks? By tomorrow night there'll be a bluebird in every backyard!"

"Say," Melray said, "that's

all right. Did you hear that, Babs?"

Barbara's eyes reluctantly relinquished Little Timmie. They weren't empty any more, Melray noticed. They were overflowing now; overflowing with something that was even worse than the emptiness had been. "Hear what, dear?"

"About the bluebirds. You can buy them now."

"That's wonderful, dear."

"I'll stop by first thing in the morning before they're all gone." He watched her eyes as they drifted away from his—drifted back to the screen and Little Timmie Smith. The silence that crept into the room was so tangible that even Mr. Smith's complacent braying could scarcely penetrate it.

IT WAS a fine bird all right—so brightly blue it almost hurt your eyes to look at it. It perched charmingly in its little plastic cage, its tiny radiant eyes steadfastly regarding its surroundings. Every now and then it would ruffle its bluer-than-blue plumage, and make a soft twittering sound. Shortly after that it would leap to the transparent wall of the cage and beat its wings rhythmically for several seconds, as though in flight, and then it would re-

turn dutifully to its perch.

When he got to the factory, Melray set the cage on the bench beside his panel, and all day long, during the intervals when no buttons were lighted up for him to push, and during his lunch hour, he watched its azure occupant. He was so excited that he could hardly wait to get home so that he could show the bluebird to Barbara.

"Look, Barbara!" he said, the minute he came in the door. "Isn't it *beautiful?*"

"Oh, it *is!*"

"I'm going to put it in the bird house. Want to come out and watch?"

"Of course, darling."

He shooed the sparrows away. They made angry gray streaks against the late afternoon sky, twittered shrilly in and out of the catalpa tree. Melray opened the cage, took out the bluebird, and set it on the little front porch of the bluebird house. It perched there motionlessly for a moment; then, after ruffling its plumage and softly twittering, it spread its wings and became a blue blur in the shimmering summer air. Melray watched, entranced. Why, that was what it had been trying to do all

day! After flying twice around the catalpa tree it returned to the little porch and perched there charmingly.

"See," Melray said proudly. "It always comes back." He pointed to a small plastic tag riveted to the base of the cage. "Guaranteed not to fly away," he read.

IT WAS an empty, lonely sound; a deep, broken sound. A sound of desperate, yearning sobbing in the night. *A terrible, hopeless sobbing....*

Melray sat up in bed, the soporific sheets billowing around him like surf-crested waves. The moonlight softly streaming through the translucent roof lay like silver snow in the room. He got up and went over and stood helplessly by the silver snowbank of Barbara's bed.

He stood there for a long time, till the coolness of the artificial temperature penetrated his pajamas and touched his skin; till he was shivering, standing there, standing there helplessly, listening to his wife's broken sobs.

He found his bathrobe in the dim wasteland of the room, and he slipped his icy feet into his sandals. The thought of

the bluebird flew through his mind, a warm, bright blur of blue. He knew suddenly that that was what he needed, that that was what he had to have.

He would bring it back to the room and show it to Barbara, and the two of them would sit there through the lonely hours discussing its blueness and its beauty; and somehow the night would go by without bitterness and pain, without emptiness....

The moon was a mellow, macrocosmic fruit suspended against a scattered, twinkling foliage of stars. The garden was a quiet place of argent patterns. He could see the dainty silhouette of the bluebird as he walked down the pebbled path. It was ruffling its plumage. As he approached, it twittered softly. Then it spread its wings and flew twice around the catalpa tree.

Didn't it ever sleep?

He reached up and took it down. It perched obediently on his forefinger, its tiny, pincer-like feet cold against his skin. *Metal cold.* In sudden, shocked horror he felt its cold blue body, searching desperately for the warmth that must be there, for the tiny quiver of heartbeat that *had* to be there.

The body was like ice. The

small breast was silent. The little radiant eyes looked at him blindly.

It ruffled its plumage. After a precise interval it made a soft twittering sound.

It was almost time for the flight around the catalpa tree....

Melray tore its head off. There was a brief flurry of blue sparks, a stench of shorted wires. The tiny light-bulb eyes popped out like bright beebees and dropped to the ground.

He tore off the plastic wings and crumpled them in his hand. He snapped the little metal feet and he ripped off the plastic legs. He plucked out the cellophane feathers one by one.

When his hands had stopped trembling he went back to the wasteland of the bedroom and lay in the cold moonlight listening to Barbara's sobs. And seeing Mr. Smith every time he closed his eyes, and all the mass-produced houses and the mass-produced gardens; and all the mass-produced people living out their mass-produced lives in pursuit of mass-produced happiness....

After a while he got up and was horribly sick in the bathroom.

THE END

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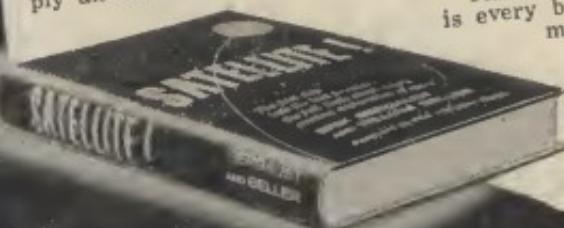
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